

CHEAP · JACK · ZITA

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CHEAP JACK ZITA

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CHEAP JACK ZITA

BY

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'MEHALAH' 'URITH' 'IN THE ROAR OF THE SEA'

'MRS. CURGENVEN' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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CHEAP JACK ZITA



CHAPTER XIV

ON ONE FOOTING

ZITA was back at Prickwillow long before the master.

She anticipated a scene with him and prepared for it. He was wont to domineer in his house and on the farm, and she had just seen how he domineered and enforced his will on an assemblage of men not under subjection to him.

She was sensible that he had gradually assumed towards herself an air of authority, but he had not hitherto addressed her in a dictatorial tone so distinct as to provoke resistance. She

had, however, perceived that the time was approaching when some understanding must be reached as to her position and their mutual relations. She was not a domestic in the house, to be ordered about or to have her liberty curtailed. She had accepted his hospitality, not entered into his service.

Zita was alive to the fact that every one in the house and on the farm—Mrs. Tunkiss, the shaking maid-of-all-work, the herd, the labourers, the stable-boy—all stood in awe of him. The housekeeper was as a lamb under his reprimand ; a word addressed to the girl with St. Vitus' dance drove her into convulsions ; an order given to the men galvanised them into momentary agility and sent the boy skipping like a flea. Zita despised them for their subserviency. She was not afraid of Drownlands. She knew that concerning him which was sufficient to make him quake before her.

Zita had been accustomed to face men of every

description. Her father had stood between her and coarse insult, but she had been obliged to confront men rude, boisterous, and disposed to take advantage of her weakness, and had acquired readiness in dealing with them, and nerve not to show timidity.

When she had seen the cringe and cower of those whom Drownlands had threatened, she tossed her chestnut-gold head in a manner expressive of impatience.

Drownlands had noticed this, and Zita had seen in his darkening brow that he had observed, was surprised and offended at the contemptuous action. The moment was not far off when he would test his strength against hers.

‘The sooner the better,’ said Zita to herself; and, instead of avoiding him, she went across the yard to meet him as he rode up the drove. She took his horse by the bridle and said, ‘I will lead him to the stable; the men are at chapel or the beerhouse, and the boy is with the cows.’

‘You won’t curry favour by doing this,’ said Drownlands.

‘Curry favour? I curry nothing. Currycomb your horse yourself!’

‘I want a word with you, Cheap Jack.’

‘And I with you, Fen-tiger—we must settle terms.’

‘Terms? What terms?’

‘The price of my lodging.’

‘I do not understand you.’

‘I have a capital copper warming-pan,’ said Zita, ‘with George and the Dragon on the lid. A stunner. I’ve reckoned up what meat I’ve ate, and all I’ve drunk, and the wear and tear of knives, linen, dishes, and so forth, and I think the copper warming-pan will cover it all.’

Drownlands had flung himself from his horse.

He stared at Zita; he did not in the least seize her meaning.

‘If you don’t care for a warming-pan,’ she said, ‘then there’s half a dozen red plush weskits, with

gilded buttons and dogs' heads on 'em—you can't wear all six, but take your choice and I'll make up with scrubbing-brushes, starch, and blue. I think the tiger-skin and a red weskit under it, and them bushy eyebrows tied in a knot as they be now, will make such a figure of you as will drive babies and girls into fits.'

'You are mocking me! You dare to do that?'

'I'm not mocking you, though I don't say I'm not inclined to whisk a red weskit before you when you stamp and blare like a bull—for fun, you know. I love fun, but I am not mocking you. I am too much obliged to you for receiving me to do that.'

'I will turn you out—you and your van—into the winter frost.'

'When? To-morrow? I am ready to go.'

'You shall not go!' exclaimed Drownlands, coming round the head of the horse to her and seizing her wrist. 'You shall not go; I know

why you want to leave me. I know whither you want to go.'

'Whither?'

'To Crumbland.'

'I have not been invited there; but if you turn me out, I shall find a shakedown somewhere. There is that girl Kenappuch at the mill. She'll have me for certain, and I'll pay her; not so high as a warming-pan, but in currants and figs and a roll of calico. The accommodation won't be so good as yours, nor the feeding so liberal.'

'You have got to know her also?'

'Yes.'

'And Mark Runham?'

'Yes; he has got to know me. That's the way to put it.'

'You are resolved to seek friends where I disapprove—among those who are my enemies?'

'I know nothing and care less about your quarrels. I've got acquainted with both, and

they are the only persons in the Fens for whom I care'—

'Oh, you care only for them?'

'Outside Prickwillow. You cut me short before I had finished my sentence. That is bad manners. If we kept manners in stock, I'd sell you a penn'orth.'

'Ah,' said Drownlands, for a moment relaxing his iron grasp, 'you allow me some of your regard?'

'I always care for every one who is kind to me, and you have been kind to both me and my poor father.' At the mention of her father Zita's lips and voice quivered, and tears filled her eyes. 'You were good to him. I do not forget that, and I'll pay you for it in anything I have got that you fancy. What do you say to smoked mother-of-pearl buttons?'

'Will you be quiet?' roared Drownlands, with an oath.

'Or,' continued Zita, 'there are several pounds

of strong fish-glue. It went soft and got mouldy in the van, but I got it dry in the kitchen and wiped the mould off. It is all right now ; the strength isn't taken out of it. A shilling a pound is what it would cost you in Ely, but as I offer it to you, I'll knock off twopence. You shall have it for tenpence per pound—so you see I do care for you, twopence in the shilling.'

Drownlands' face darkened ; he pressed the girl's wrist so that she uttered an exclamation of pain.

'You hurt me,' she said ; 'that's something off your account.'

'You are making a jest of me!' gasped the man. 'And you dare to do so? You are not afraid?'

'What should I be afraid of?'

'I can hurt you—worse than by nipping your wrist.'

'And I can defend myself,' she answered. '*I*

afraid of *you*? No; it was you who trembled and screamed like a woman when I touched you on the river bank that night we first met. It is *you* who have reason to be afraid of *me*.'

The colour went out of his face.

'No, I am not afraid of you,' continued Zita. 'I remember how, when you sought to ride on, I stopped your way, and drove you where I wanted you to go—drove you with the flail.'

He released her arm. She felt that his hand was shaking. He knew that it shook, and he was afraid lest she should observe it.

He walked in silence to the stable with his head lowered. Zita followed. She had gained a first advantage. She had forestalled his attack, and now, instead of her being cowed by him, he was subdued by her.

When they were both in the stable,—for she had followed him to show him how little fear she entertained,—then he addressed her in an altered tone.

‘You do not intend to leave me?’

‘No; if you desire me to remain, I will remain.’

‘I do desire it. I could not endure that you should go.’

‘That is right; but why did you threaten me? I will stay. I could not put up old Jewel in the windmill, and I haven’t been invited to Crumbland by Mark Runham.’

He stamped his foot impatiently and set his teeth.

‘Why do you speak of him again?’

‘Speech is free here—in the van—in a king’s palace—everywhere save a gaol. I will speak of any one I choose, at any time, before any one, and in any place I like.’

‘Why did you go with him to-day?’

‘Because I am free to go where I choose, and with whom I choose. This is Sunday, and a holiday.’

‘Yes; but if you have any regard for me, do

not go with him at all.' He drew a long breath, removed and put on again his broad-brimmed hat. 'Why do you speak to me of payment for the trifling things I have done for you? of payment with warming-pans, red waistcoats, and fish-glue?'

'I am glad we are round to that point again,' said Zita, 'for speak of that I must. No one can be expected to do things for nothing. If you house me and Jewel, and feed us both'—

'You have worked—you have done more than that beldame Leehanna and the girl would do in twenty years.'

'I have taken that into account. I know how many hours I have worked at fivepence three-farthings (needles and thread included). Nevertheless, the balance is against me. There is the warming-pan, or the scrubbing-brushes, or the fish-glue'—

He struck his fist against the stable door to drown her words.

Zita put her hand on his arm.

‘It is of no good your acting the fool,’ she said. ‘What is right is right. I shouldn’t feel square in my insides if the account were not balanced. My dear father was mighty particular on that score. Every night we balanced our accounts as true as any banker, with a stump of a pencil as he sucked. If I don’t balance I can’t sleep. I’ll put to my account some pins I had set to yours, all because of that squinch of the wrist you gave me. If I were to leave your house to-morrow, Master Drownlands, you’d find on the shelf in my room a row of articles that I reckoned up would belong in rights to you as balancing our account.’

He did not answer. He thrust his horse into a stall and put a halter round its head.

Then Zita went to the corn-chest and brought out a feed. The horse whinnied as he sniffed the oats. Drownlands was in the stall tightening the knot at the end of the halter. As Zita

turned to depart, after having tossed the oats into the manger, he came out after her, and, laying hold of one side of the corn-measure, said—

‘Are you going?’

‘Yes. I have fed Pepper.’

He shook the measure, and said, in tones of angry discouragement, ‘You will not take a bite of my bread, nor lie on a flock of my wool, nor cover your golden head with one tile of my roof, but you must weigh each and prize and pay me its value to the turn of a hair.’

‘Not so exactly; of course, I leave a margin.’

‘A margin of what?’

‘Profits!’

‘To whom?’

‘To myself, of course. We should never get along in the world without profits. When we come to deal among friends, as you and I, then the profits are reasonable. But when one has to do with the general public,—that father always

called the General Jackass,—then you lay it on thick and heavy. Without profits of some sort one can't sleep the sleep of innocence, as father said. But it is one thing dealing with General Jackass and another with a friend ; and I want you to understand the footing on which we deal is the latter.'

'So—the footing of buy and sell?'

'Yes. I take my small profits. When a dressmaker makes your frocks, she charges you for a packet of needles and uses one—the rest are profits. She charges you for a knot of tape, and uses two yards and a half—the rest is profit. And she cuts out eight yards of lining, and puts down twelve—four are profits ; and she puts you some frilling round your neck and cuffs, charging three yards, and she uses one—there's profits again. I do the same with you. I couldn't sleep if I didn't. It's feather bed and pillow and bolster to me—profits.'

'Take what you will. All you like.'

‘No,’ said Zita. ‘Fair trade between us. We deal as friends. I respect and regard you too greatly to treat you as if you were General Jackass.’

Then she left the empty corn-measure in his hand and walked away, with a swing of the shoulders, a toss of the head, an elasticity in her tread, that appertained to one who was victor—not to one defeated. And Drownlands stood looking after her, holding the empty corn-measure, and he wondered at himself that he had been beaten at every point by this girl—he who had galloped home boiling with anger, resolved to break her into meek subjection to his will.

CHAPTER XV

ON ANOTHER FOOTING

A SOUGH of wind passed over the Fens like a long-drawn sigh. Every one who heard it listened in silence. It was repeated, and then the general comment was, 'The skating is over.'

Nor was the comment falsified by the event. The wind had veered round suddenly, without warning, to the south-west. It blew all night and sent a warm rain against the windows that faced that quarter. It covered wood and walls with dew. The ice broke up in the river, it dissolved in the dykes. The sails of the mills were again in revolution, they whirled merrily, merrily.

Zita had come upon the embankment to see

the broken ice drift down the sluggish river, swept along by the wind rather than the current. There she encountered Mark Runham.

‘What, you here, Cheap Jackie? No, hang it! I won’t call you that. It seems impudent; but I do not mean that, you may be sure.’

‘I know that, and am not offended.’

‘Your name—it continually slips my memory.’

‘Zita.’

‘A queer sort of a name that.’

‘It is not often you meet a Cheap Jack girl. They do not come thick as windmills in the flats. So it suits me to bear a queer name.’

‘A queer name becomes a queer girl.’

‘Thanks. I have something for you—half a pound of bird’s eye.’

‘What for?’

‘In payment for my run on the ice.’

‘I do not want payment.’

‘It gave you trouble, made you hot, but it was a very great pleasure to me.’

‘I won’t take it.’ The young fellow laughed with his merry eyes as well as with his fresh lips. ‘Can you understand this, that it gave me five times as much pleasure as it did you to spin you along and see the red roses bloom in your cheeks and those dark eyes of yours twinkle as though there were Jack o’ Lanterns dancing in them? Zita, it is not every day that a lad gets the chance of running a pretty girl along the ice. It is I am in debt to you. We’ll square the account, anyhow.’ He caught her head between his hands and gave her a kiss on her red lips. ‘There is the account scored out, and a new account begun.’

‘That is not fair!’ exclaimed Zita, shrinking back.

‘What! not settled? Again, then.’ He kissed her once more. ‘And so—till all is right, and the balance squared.’

Then he laughed, and, releasing her head, said—

‘You know we raced,—that old Drownlands and I,—and you were to be the prize. I won you.’ Then, seeing that she looked disturbed, he went off to, ‘Now, Cheap Jackie, tell me, was not that a droll sort of a life, going over the world in that comical van?’

‘It was a very happy life, and the van was not comical at all. It is splendid.’

‘I have not seen it.’

‘Then why did you call it unsuitable names?’

‘A jolly life, was it?’

‘Indeed it was. I was very happy in it—specially when we had piled up the profits.’

‘You made a pile when you sold my father a flail for a guinea.’

‘We did ; but if it is any satisfaction to you to know it, it was the thoughts of that made him pass away so happy.’

‘A guinea was nought to my father ; he was rich. Now I am rich.’ Then, with a trip of his foot on the bank as though he were dancing,

‘Zita, what a joke it would be for us to go round in the summer with the old van and the stock-in-trade. What have you done with the goods?’

‘They are safe.’

‘And we will visit Swaffham, and Littleport, and Ely together, and sell away like blazes. I’ll attend to the horse, and you shall do all the talking the folk want. What fun it will be!’

‘No,’ said Zita, colouring; ‘that will not be right.’

‘Why not?’

‘No. It was all very well with my father. But I will not go again.’

‘You must—you shall—with me!’

‘I will not—indeed I will not.’ She turned away.

‘Well, anyhow you will show me the van?’

‘Yes. When you like.’

‘I can’t well go into Prickwillow as matters are between us and Drownlands—not that I bear him ill-will, but he is sour as a crab towards

me. We will manage it somehow at some time. But I can't help thinking what fun it would be for us two to travel the world all over together, selling pots and pans. I wish I had been born a Cheap Jack. Where are you off to now, Zita ?'

'I am going to see Kainie at Red Wings.'

'I will go with you. I also want to see her. I am very fond of Kainie, I am.' Said with a mischievous laugh.

'I daresay you are, but I am going alone.'

'Nonsense! I shall go with you. I must see Kainie. I have an errand to her.'

'Who sent you ?'

Mark hesitated, then said, 'Well, no one. But it is business. I must go.'

'Then go. I will remain here.'

Zita observed a lighter moored to the bank in the river. She stepped towards it. 'I will go into the barge. Will you come with me and punt me about?'

'I cannot. I must go to Kainie.'

‘You wanted to come with me in the van, asked me to go with you. Now I ask you to come with me in the boat, and you will not.’

‘I pay you off,’ said Mark good-naturedly. ‘You would not travel with me in the van, so I will not travel with you in the barge. But, seriously, I cannot. I must go on to Kainie. Come along with me,’ urged Mark. ‘Kainie will be pleased to see you.’

‘Oh! you can answer for her?’

‘In some things; certainly in this.’

‘I will not go.’

Zita pouted and turned her back on Mark. The young man did not press her to change her intention. The decision in her face, the look in her eyes, convinced him that his labour would be in vain were he to attempt it. He started in the direction of Red Wings without her, and whistled as he walked. Zita’s brow was moody. She was a girl of impulse and of no self-restraint, changeful in temper and vehement in passion.

There was no reason why she should resent Mark's going to Red Wings, and yet she did resent it. If he had to go, and she refused to accompany him, he must go without her. That was obvious, and yet she was very wroth. In her mind she contrasted Drownlands with Mark. She had but to express a wish to the former, and it was complied with. Had she said to him that she desired him to row her on the canal, he would have placed himself at her service with eager delight. But this scatterbrained Mark had no notion of submission to her wishes. He had desired her society on the bank ; when she refused it, he did without it, and did without it with a light heart—he went away whistling.

Zita stepped into the barge and seated herself on the side. She put her chin in her hand and looked sullenly into the water full of broken, half-dissolved pieces of ice.

She was hot, her angry blood was racing

through her veins. She was, in her way, as impetuous as Drownlands. She had been suffered in her girlhood by her father to follow her own bent, to do just what she liked. But, indeed, there had been no occasion for him to cross her, their interests were identical. Good-natured though Zita was, she was masterful. She had sense, but sense is sometimes obscured by passion.

She sat biting her nails. A fire was in her cheeks, and now and then the tears forced themselves into her burning eyes.

What could Mark have to call him to Red Wings?

What possible business could he have with Kainie?

Red Wings was not on his land ; the mill did not drain his dykes.

Zita marvelled how long Mark would remain with Kerenhappuch. Would he sit down with her in her cabin? Would their conversation

turn on herself—Zita? Would Mark say that she was sulky? What would Kerenhappuch reply? Would she not say, ‘What else can you expect from a girl who is a vagabond? We who lead settled lives in mills and farmhouses know how to behave ourselves. What can you get out of a chimney but soot? What does a marsh breed but gadflies?’

It is really wonderful what a cloud of torments an ingenious mind can rouse if it resolves to give run to fancy. Perhaps a woman is more prone to this than a man. She conceives conversations relative to herself; she puts into the mouths of the speakers the most offensive expressions relative to herself. She wreathes their faces with contemptuous smiles, gives to their voices insulting intonations, and finally assumes that all the brood of her festering brain is real fact, and not mirage.

It was so now with Zita.

She was startled from her reverie of self-

torment by a shock in the boat. She looked up, startled, and saw before her a man with long arms and large hands, dark-haired and dark-eyed. He was handsome, but his face bore an expression of sour discontent. The thin lips were indicative of a sharp and querulous temper, and the cheeks seemed as though they could not dimple into laughter.

‘What are you doing in the lighter?’ asked the man, whom Zita recognised as Ephraim Beamish, the orator.

‘I suppose I have as much right to be in the boat as you,’ answered the girl peevishly.

‘No doubt. We neither have any right anywhere. We are both poor. I know who you are—the Cheap Jack girl. I hear you have been taken into Prickwillow. Wish you happiness. It is not the place I should care to be in. Drownlands is not the man to clothe the poor, house the wanderer, feed the hungry, without expecting his reward—and that here. He does

nothing of good to any one but to serve his own ends. He has just had me turned out.'

'Turned out of what?'

'Turned out of my mill, out of my employ, out of my livelihood. I have now to run about the fens, in ice and snow. I have no home. I am a gentleman, however, for I have no work. The rats may shelter in the barn, the mice may nest in the stack, but I must be without a roof to cover my head, without work to engage my hands, and without bread to put into my mouth. And all for why? Because I have been bold to speak the truth. Truth is like light. Men hate it and turn their eyes from it. Them as speaks the truth gets persecuted, and I am one of these.'

'You can obtain work elsewhere,' said Zita, displeased at having her imaginary troubles broken in on by some one with a real grievance.

'No, I cannot,' answered Beamish; 'the owners

of property hang together like bees when they swarm. If you disturb one, the whole hive sets on you and stings you to death.'

'Well,' said Zita irritably, 'you need not tell me all this. I cannot assist you.'

'I do not suppose you can. But—has Property got into your blood, that you speak so sharp to me? Maybe, like a bat, you're hanging on to it by a claw. Like a gnat, you have your lips to it, and are sucking your fill. I do not ask your help. I fend for myself. But I like to talk. Nothing will be done to correct evils if the evils be not talked about. You must go round Jericho and blow the trumpets seven times, and seven times again, before the walls will fall, and we can march up and take the city. Let Property look out. The working people will not stand to be robbed and maltreated any longer.'

Beamish unloosed the rope that attached the boat to the shore, and, taking a pole, thrust out

and began slowly to force the vessel up stream, talking as he punted.

‘You may tell Drownlands my curse rests on him ; and that will rot his timber and rust his corn.’

‘I will bear him no such message,’ said Zita. ‘But where are you taking me?’

‘Up the river. I shall leave you presently ; but I will return and punt you back again.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘To Red Wings.’

‘What do you want there?’

‘I have an errand,’ answered Beamish.

‘There is one gone there before you, with an errand from himself—and that is Mark Runham.’

‘He there!’ exclaimed Pip Beamish, leaning on the punting-pole and looking down into the water. ‘Property meets one everywhere. Property blights everything. I am a poor chap. I am cast out of employ ; but I did think I had my ewe lamb. And now Property comes

between me and her. Property says to me' "Go—what I cannot consume I will destroy, lest you have it." Do you think, you Cheap Jack girl, that Mark Runham will marry Kainie? He is a man of property, and property hungers for property. She is like me. She has nothing. She is a miller grinding nought save water.'

He thrust the boat towards the shore.

'I'll not go to see her,' said Beamish. 'I could not bear it. I'm off to the Duck at Isleham. I shall meet there some fellows who love the working people, and who will combine to teach these men who hold the Fens in their fists to deal with their labourers justly and mercifully.'

He leaped ashore, mounted the bank, and, standing there, extended his long arms and expanded his great hands, and cried, 'I see the day coming! I see the light about to break! The trumpet will sound, and the dead and crushed working men will rise and stand on their

feet. That will be a day of vengeance!—a day of fire and consuming heat! Then will the fen-farmers call to the earth to swallow them, and to the isles to cover them, against the anger of the dead men risen up in judgment against them.'

'There comes Mark,' said Zita. 'I suppose I must get him to punt me home. But I shall not speak to him all the way.'

CHAPTER XVI

BURNT HATS

AT the time of our tale, the Duck at Isleham—a solitary inn on slightly rising ground—was notorious as a place of resort for poachers, a centre to which smuggled goods were brought from the Wash, and whence they were distributed, and a general rendezvous for the dissatisfied. Not a bad trade was done at the Duck. Thither came the poachers as to a mart for the disposal of their game, and the dealers to take the spoil of the poachers; thither came not only those who brought, up the dark path from the sea, spirits which had not paid duty, but also the farmers who desired to lay in supplies. As the fen-water was not potable

unmixed, it was a matter of necessity for the fen-dwellers to temper it with something that would neutralise its unpleasant savour as well as kill its unwholesome elements. Moreover, such being the case, those who desired to lay in a stock of this counteracting agent went for it, by a law of nature, to the cheapest shop, and the cheapest shop was that where the traffic was in spirits that were contraband. Lastly, at the Duck assembled the great company of grumblers, large everywhere, but especially large in the Fens.

As the Duck afforded space for a good many grumblers in bar and kitchen and parlour, and as grumblers like to grumble into the ears of men of their own kidney, the Duck drew to it the discontented of all classes—farmers dissatisfied with their rent, yeomen dissatisfied at their rates, artisans out of humour because trade was slack, gangers, clayers, bankers, gaulters, slodgers, millers, molers, gozzards—every one whom the depressing atmosphere of the Fens made

dispirited, and who thought the cause of his depression was due to the oppression of some one else.

The kitchen of the Duck was full. A great fire of turf was heaped up, and glowed red, diffusing heat, but giving out no flame, and, notwithstanding the tobacco smoke, filling the place with its penetrating, peculiar odour. The men present—on this occasion they were all men—were drinking; they were mostly men of the class of agricultural labourer. Among them were two or three with dazed eyes, men silent, pallid, who looked at the speakers and acquiesced in every sentiment or opinion expressed, however contradictory they might be. These were opium-eaters.

In the Fens, almost every cottage grows its crop of white poppy in the small garden. Of the poppy heads a tea is brewed. The mothers are accustomed to work in the fields, hoeing between the ranks of wheat. The rich soil that produces the corn produces also weeds that have to be kept under. That the babe may not

interfere with the mother earning a small wage, it is given poppy tea, and that sends it to sleep for the day. But the drops of opium thus administered in infancy affect the tender brains, bewilder them, and subject the child to nervous pains. As it grows up to man or womanhood, it has recourse to the drug to which it was brought up in infancy. A large business in laudanum is done in the Fens, and much of the distraught mind and tortured nerve is due to this cause. The poppy tea dispels trouble as surely as whisky, and opium dulls pain at a cheaper and surer rate than the surgeon who boggles over its removal.

‘I tell you,’ said Pip Beamish, ‘it is due to the farmers and yeomen. Look at them, up to the eyes in gold, and gold that is squeezed out of the fen by your hands. Till they have been taught a lesson, and that a sharp and stinging one, they will go on in the same way. No Acts of Parliament will help us. You may send up whom you will, Whig or Tory, to Westminster,

it is the same. No party will do aught for you. No judges and no jury are of any avail, for law can't come in and right us. We must do that with our own hands. When a boy won't do the right thing, you put a stick across his back and make him; you don't ask for an Act of Parliament, you don't elect a member to teach him his duty. We must teach our farmers as you teach idle and thievish boys. Teach them in such a way as they won't forget. Teach them to fear the rod. Set the stackyards blazing throughout the Fens, and by the light of those fires they'll begin to see what is the way of justice and equity.'

'I don't see how that's going to lower the price of wheat,' said a ganger, named Silas Gotobed. 'You sez that the cost of bread is too high. If you burn the wheatstacks, there will be less corn, and up the price will go.'

'You're right there. That's reason, Silas,' said a third, Thomas Goat, a gaulter. 'The mischief don't lie with the farmers. They

grow the corn—some one must do that. The wickedness is in the eaters.'

'Why, we're all eaters.'

'Ay!' said Goat sententiously. 'But we've a right to eat; there be a lot cats as hasn't a right to do so.'

'You mean rats and mice.'

'No, I don't—leastways not four-legged ones.'

'What do you mean, then?'

'It is them collegers,' said Goat. 'I've been to Cambridge. I've seen them there, a thousand of them. They come up in swarms from every part of England, and there they do nought but eat and drink and row on the river, and play cricket on Parker's Piece. Rowin' and playin' cricket ain't qualifications for eatin'. What would you say if a thousand rats, big as bullocks, was to come on to the Fens and attack our stacks? There'd be a pretty outcry. Every man would take down his gun. The terriers would be called for. Traps, poison would be

laid, and none quiet till every rat was exterminated. Very well, up from every part of England come these darned collegers to the Univarsity, and spend their time there, eatin'—eatin'—eatin'. Mates, I axes, what are they eatin'? It is the wheat we grow on our fens. I calculate that one-half of what we grow goes down into their stomicks. If there were no collegers, then there'd be twice as much corn, and corn would be at forty-eight instead of ninety-six. It is that Univarsity and them collegers does it. I have shown you that as clear as these five fingers of mine. If that ain't reason, show me where it is to be found.'

'I don't hold with you,' said Gotobed, impatient at having his say snapped out of his mouth, 'I suppose collegers must eat somewhere.'

'Let them stay and eat at home.'

'Well, but what about the price of wheat at their homes? Won't they diminish the supply there?'

'That don't concern us,' shouted a clayer named Gathercole. 'It is no odds to us what

the supply and what the price is elsewhere. All that concerns us is the supply and the price here in the Fens. Goat, you've hit the wrong nail on the head! I know better than you; it's the bankers does it.'

'What have you to say against the bankers?' asked Goat. 'I'd like to know where the corn would be if the bankers did not keep the rivers from overflow.'

'I mean those who have banks in towns,' explained Gathercole. 'I've been to Mortlock's in Ely. I've seen what the clerks do there. They have drawers full of gold. They don't trouble to put their fingers to it, they shovel it in and shovel it out like muck. Whence does Mortlock get all that gold, I ask. It comes out of the Fens. The farmers are such dizzy-fools that they put their money there for Mortlock to take care of, and Mortlock sends the money out of the country to America. What's the advantage of the farmers growing corn, and of

the labourers helping to grow it, what's the pleasure to reap and sow and plough and mow and be a farmer's boy, if all the money earned and addled goes into Mortlock's bank, and Mortlock sends it to America? I wish I was in Parliament one week, and I'd hang every banker in the country, and burn every ship as takes the money out of England and carries it to America.'

'I say it is the millers,' said Isaac Harley, a clayer. 'You send a sack of corn to the soak-mill, and you get back half a sack of flour. How is that? There should be as much flour come back as corn went, but there does not. I have proved it scores of times. I've sent a sack so full of wheat that I could scarce bind the mouth, and when it came back as flour it was but half full. That is what makes corn so dear—the millers steal it. If I were king for half a day, I'd drown every miller in England in his own dam.'

'You are all of you out,' said a small landowner, named Abraham Cutman. 'But it is

like your ignorance. You feel that the shoe pinches, but you don't know where it pinches, and why it pinches. I will tell you. I have education, and you have not. It is the rates. We are paying from six to seven shillings an acre for the drainage of the Fens. The rate has been up to ten shillings and sixpence. Why should we pay that? We can't afford to pay seven shillings an acre in rates, and pay our workmen well also. All the profits are consumed in rates. The Commissioners stick it on, and they can't help it; they must have the banks kept up and the mills in working order.'

'Of course they must,' threw in the gaulter.

'They must have their mills,' said Beamish. 'But why am I thrown out of employ, that did no wrong, and never neglected my duty?'

'Silence all round. Listen to me,' said Cutman. 'The wrong lies here. Take off the rate, and the price of corn will go down, and the price of labour will go up.'

‘That’s it. Cutman has it!’ exclaimed several.

But Goat dissented. ‘There must be a rate,’ said he, ‘or how should I be paid for my gaulting? and without gaulting there can be no banking.’

‘Of course there must be a rate. I’d have it permanently fixed by Act of Parliament at fifteen shillings an acre.’

‘You would?’

‘Yes, I would; so that gaulters and bankers should have double wages. They work hard and deserve it.’

‘Right you are, master,’ said Goat; but others murmured.

‘Why should gaulters and bankers only have double pay? Why not molers and gozzards also?’ others again asked. ‘How about the price of wheat then?’

‘I said I’d have the rate fixed at fifteen shillings an acre,’ pursued Cutman, looking about him with an air of superiority. ‘Fifteen shillings an acre—not a penny less. But I’d

have the rate shifted from fen-land as wants draining to all other land in Great Britain as doesn't want draining. The rate should be laid on all other shoulders except ours. Stick a rate on to Mortlock's and all bankers. Stick it on to the colleges and the universities. Stick it on to all high and dry lands, where there is no call for banking and draining. Stick it on where you like, only take it off from the Fens. Why should we pay rates for draining our land when the farmers on high ground pay nothing? They have their land six or seven shillings an acre cheaper than do we. If I were in the Ministry, the first thing I would do would be to impose a compulsory rate of fifteen shillings an acre on all land that didn't want draining, to pay for the draining of land that did want it. Then we'd have high times of it here in the Fens—farmers, bankers, slodgers, all round. If that is not reason, and you don't see it, so much the worse for your intelligences.'

‘I don’t call that reason at all,’ said Goat. ‘Don’t tell me the Commissioners would pay us double wages when the rate was at fifteen. It is six now, and I get eleven shillings a week. Twelve years ago it was half a guinea rate, and then my wage was ten shillings. If the rate were up to fifteen I should be wuss off. Every four shillings the rate goes up my wage goes down a shilling. With the rate at fifteen, I’d be worse off—with a wage of five and sixpence, or six shillings at most. I hold to it that the mischief lies in the Univarsity, with them collegers a-eatin’—eatin’—eatin’. I’ll fight at flap-chaps any man as disputes my argiment.’

‘I dispute it,’ said Silas Gotobed, starting up.

‘Very well. We’ll find out which has the best of the argiment and reason on his side with flap-chaps.’

‘My argiment is this,’ said Gotobed. ‘Rivers ought to run uphill. If they don’t choose to, they should be made to, by Act of Parliament.’

Then we'd be dry, and them on high grounds would be wet. Then they'd have the rates and the bother, and we'd be free. That is my contention, and it's all gammon about them collegers.'

He placed himself opposite Goat.

'I don't care what you may call yourself,' said he to his opponent, 'Goat or sheep; but you're an ass, and every one knows it.'

Then Ephraim Beamish ran between the men, who stood facing each other with threatening looks.

'Be reasonable,' he said, thrusting them apart with his long arms. 'Why do you fly at each other, instead of at the common foe?'

'I don't know what be the common foe,' retorted Goat, 'if it bain't the collegers. If I was in Parliament'—

'It's the bankers,' said Jonas Gathercole. 'If I was in Parliament'—

'It's the millers!' shouted Harley. 'If I was in Parliament'—

‘It’s the rates!’ exclaimed Cutman; ‘and a law should be made, and shall be when I’m in Parliament’—

‘You’re every one out!’ roared Silas Gotobed; ‘it’s Providence, as don’t do what it should be made to do, and force the rivers to run uphill.’

‘Sit down! you’re drunk,’ cried Cutman.

‘I’m not going to be ordered about by you,’ retorted the ganger; ‘we’re all equal here. I haven’t been bankrupt and sold my stacks twice over.’

Cutman fell into the rear. He had been guilty of fraudulent conduct at his bankruptcy.

‘I say it is the Univarsity, and I maintains my argiment,’ said Goat. ‘I’ll prove it on your chaps.’

‘I sez it is the rivers ought to run uphill. I’ll box your donkey ears if you denies it. That’s my argiment.’

Gotobed made a lunge at his opponent and

missed him. Flap-chaps is a pastime affected in the Fens, more so in former times than at present, but not out of favour now. It consists in this. Two men face each other and endeavour to slap each other's cheeks, right or left, as best they can, and as best they can to ward off with the same open palm the blows aimed at their own chaps. Those who play this game acquire great dexterity at it; but when much ale or spirits has been drunk, then the eye has lost its quickness of perception, the hand its steadiness, the brain its coolness, and the contest rapidly degenerates into a drunken brawl and a roll on the floor, with fisticuffs and head-bumping.

It promised to so degenerate on the present occasion. Gotobed was the most intoxicated and least able to parry the blows levelled at him, and every time Goat's hand made his cheek sting, it roused him to a further access of fury that blinded him to what he was about; he withdrew his left hand from behind his back,

This provoked an outcry from the lookers-on of, 'Not fair play! Hand back! hand back!'

Beamish again endeavoured to interpose, but came off with both his ears tingling; he had received a blow on one cheek from Goat, and on the other from Gotobed. The strife recommenced after this futile attempt to separate the men. Slap, slap, on the chaps of Gotobed, followed by a blow from his fist in the face of his adversary. This occasioned a yell from all in the room of 'Cheat—not fair! a fine! a fine, Silas! Fair game or none at all.'

'I'll pay a fine indeed!' roared Gotobed. Then, springing at his opponent, who staggered stupefied under the blow he had received, he snatched his hat from his head, and, thrusting it into the fire, shouted, 'Caps! Caps!' Then he dashed at Cutman, who wore a white beaver.

'Your hat!' he demanded.

‘You shall not have it. It is as good as new.’

‘I will have it,’ answered Gotobed. ‘Ain’t we all equal? Isn’t it the rule? What are you better than me? One cap—all caps. That’s the rule.’

He tore the white beaver out of the yeoman’s hands, and rammed it with his ironshod boot into the glowing turf fire.

‘Mates! Mates! Show up your caps!’

Then ensued wild confusion. Some snatched the caps and hats from those who were near them, some endeavoured to protect their own headgear from confiscation, and fought for them. Some thrust their own caps into the flames, and in ten minutes there was not one in the company but was without a cover for his crown.¹

¹ Burnt caps is a curious and inexplicable custom in the Fens. It is one that terminates many a brawl. If one man burns the hat of another, it is *de rigueur* that all the rest of the company should surrender their headgear to complete the holocaust.

Beamish had made angry resistance. Three men assailed him, tripped him up, and sent him sprawling on the alehouse floor. A fourth wrenched his hat away and thrust it into the flames, shouting, 'You're a fine chap to say all men are equal, and want to keep your own hat when the rest are bareheaded.'

The landlord stepped outside, to see that the fiery tinder did not fall on and ignite the thatch. He returned and said, 'It is snowing.'

'Snowing, is it?' said Gotobed, staggering to the door. 'Then we shall all wear white night-caps to cool our heads.' Standing in the doorway, sustaining himself by a hand on each of the jambs, looking in, he shouted to his comrades, 'I am right. You are all wrong. At next election I ain't going to vote for no candidate as won't promise to make the rivers run uphill. Nothing will be as it ought to be—price of corn won't be low, and wages won't be high, and farmers cease to oppress, and bankers to send the money out

of this country, and millers to fill their fists with flour, and Commissioners to pocket money that ought to have gone to the gangers, and collegians to cease to eat—till Providence has been forced to do what it ort—and make the rivers run uphill.'

CHAPTER XVII

A CRAWL ABROAD

NO country in the world is so subject to variations in the climate as England, and in no part of England are the variations so felt as in the Fens. No hills, no belts of trees there break the force of the wind. The gales rush over the plains unresisted from every quarter. Elsewhere there are hedgerows, on the sunny side of which appear the celandine and primrose in early spring, then the red-robin, the bluebell, our lady's smock, and the gorgeous spires of foxglove later still. There are no hedgeflowers in the Fens, for there are no hedges. Elsewhere the landscape is variegated with coppice that is brown in autumn

and pine woods that are dark green all the year. It is not so in the Fens. There are no trees. When the snow falls, it envelops the entire surface in white.

The frost had passed away, and the waters had been released. With the thaw the mills had been set again in motion, and the sails flew fast to make up for lost time. Now again a single night had altered the complexion of the fen-land. All was white that had been black. The snow had filled the ruts, and, consolidating, had formed a comparatively smooth surface. Rivers and dykes were not frozen, only a little cat ice had formed among the reeds.

Zita was in the farmyard. She had gone there to put her van to rights. The van demanded her attention. The fowls had taken to roosting on the top, and had made it untidy. There was no keeping them away. They could be, and they were, excluded from the interior of the van, but not from the shed in which the van stood.

Formerly, they had been satisfied with rafters and manger ; now, whether out of perversity or love of variety, or because the van satisfied their ideal, they deserted their ancient roosting-places and crowded the van roof.

This was a source of incessant annoyance to Zita, who could not endure the degradation to which the van was subjected. Every few days she visited the shed, pail and scrubbing-brush in hand, and thoroughly cleansed the conveyance.

She had been thus engaged, and had flung the dirty water at a clucking hen that sauntered up with purpose to resume its perch on the van top, when a pair of hands was laid on her shoulders, and, looking round, she saw Mark.

‘What has brought you here?’ she asked in surprise.

‘What but your own sweet self. I have not seen you for some days. As you were not

outside the farmyard, I have come into it to seek you.'

'You ought not to have done so. The master will be angry.'

'He is from home. I saw him ride to Ely.'

'But if he hears that you have been here?'

'You need not tell him.'

'I will not tell him, but others may—mischief-makers. Then I shall suffer.'

'You can take care of yourself, I warrant.'

'You are right, I can protect myself. I am not a servant, but a lodger. I pay for everything I receive and consume here—even for this soap and the use of this pail.'

'And this is the van?'

'Yes, that is my old home. I was born in it. I have lived in it all my life. Whatever I know I have learned in it. It is a fine thing to crawl over the world like a snail, with one's house on one's back.'

‘The snail-crawling is over with you now. You refused to let me go with you.’

‘Yes ; it is over for the winter. What I may do when the spring comes, I cannot say. My blood runs, my feet tingle. When the white butterflies are about, I daresay I shall spread my wings also. I mean my red and gold curtains.’

‘And I may go with you?’ mischievously.

‘No ; if I go, I go alone.’

‘Let me walk round and admire your house on wheels.’

‘You do not see it to advantage,’ said Zita regretfully. ‘It is not dressed out. The pans and brushes and mats are stowed away, that make it glitter just like a lifeguardsman. The inside is taken out. The curtains are unhung. And then those dratted fowls are a nuisance. They have taken a fancy to the van. If Master Drownlands and I were on better terms, I’d ax him to have the fowls killed, or the shed boarded up, that they might not come in.’

‘What? you are not on good terms with old Ki?’

‘Only middling. I have had to teach him to keep his distance.’

‘Oh! he wanted to come to too close quarters?’—small blame to him,’ said Mark, laughing.

‘He and I could not agree about terms—that was it,’ said Zita, with an impatient and annoyed toss of her head.

‘Let the van come to my place,’ said Runham. ‘Then I will stow it away out of reach of all fowls.’

Zita shook her head. ‘I like to look at my van every day.’

‘Well, that is no reason against sending it to Crumbland. If you come to look at it twice a day, so much the better pleased I shall be.’

‘I cannot send the van anywhere where I am not living, and this is my lodging for the winter,’ said Zita.

‘And how goes the horse?’ asked Mark.

‘He don’t go at all,’ replied the girl. ‘He eats and thinks and gets bloated. He hasn’t enough to do. I’m afraid he’ll be out of health.’

‘Let us have him into the shafts and trot him out a bit.’

‘What? in the van?’

‘Of course, in the van.’

Zita flushed with pleasure. ‘I shall love it above all things—but trot he won’t. He never trotted in his life but once, and that was on the fifth of November. A gipsy had tied a Roman candle to his tail. He trotted then. After every flare and pop he went on at a run, then he stopped and looked behind him for an explanation. Then away went the Roman candle again, and a great globe of fire shot away high over the roof of the van. At that Jewel trembled and trotted on once more. Father was away. I was younger then by some years, and it frightened me. I did not dare to touch the

Roman candle. Jewel ran about two miles, and when the firework was exhausted, he stood still, and, with thinking about it, and trying to understand and unable, fell asleep in the middle of the road. Father found us there, and he tried to persuade Jewel to return the two miles, but he was obstinate—tremenjous—and wouldn't move. At last father was forced to tie a Roman candle to his nose, and that drove him backwards the two miles. But I don't think Jewel ever quite got over the surprise of that fifth of November.'

When Mark had done laughing at Zita's story, —and Zita laughed as she told it, and laughed when it was over, because Mark's laugh was irresistible,—then the young fellow said, 'It will be fun for me, pleasure to you, it will exercise the horse, and freshen and sweeten the van. We will go a drive, in preparation for the grand tour in the spring. Where is the harness? I'll rig the grey up.'

‘You do not know how to set about it,’ said Zita.

‘What? not know how to harness a horse?’

‘You do not know Jewel. He has to be talked to, and his reason convinced. He has his fancies, and they must be humoured. He knows my voice and the touch of my hand, whereas you are a stranger.’

Zita went to find Jewel and put the horse in the shafts. Whilst thus engaged, she talked to Mark.

‘The master had him out one day, and put him in the plough. It offended Jewel, who was not accustomed to that sort of thing. He set his feet straight down, stiffened his legs, back went his ears, he curled his under lip, and looked out at the corners of his eyes. Not a step would he take; it hurt his self-respect. Now, wait here by Jewel’s head whilst I go indoors after the crimson curtains and gold tassels. I could not drive without them; it would not be showing

proper regard for the van, and it might hurt Jewel's feelings. It won't take five minutes to rig up the curtains, and whilst I am after them, you can make friends with the horse. Go in front of him and speak flattering words; say how shapely are his legs, and how silken is his hair; but, whatever you do, not a word about the Roman candles, or he'll never take kindly to you.'

'All right, Zita. Where is the whip?'

'Whip? bless you! he don't want a whip. Why, the crack of a whip would so frighten him that he would sit down. He'd suppose it was fifth of November again. He'd curl his tail under him, and lay his nose between his legs, and set back his ears, but keep an eye open watching you and winking.'

Eventually, the van was considered by Zita to be sufficiently decorated to be got under way, and Jewel was induced, by flattery and caresses, to start along the drove.

The van was lighter than Jewel had ever known it to be, and he might have been expected to take this into consideration, and accelerate his pace; but, under the supposition that by so doing he would be establishing a precedent that might be quoted on a future occasion, he adopted his wonted pace, as when drawing the van laden with its many and multifarious contents.

‘The thing jolts—rather,’ said Mark, laughing. ‘What would become of the goods, were they here?’

‘They would be thrown all over the shop,’ answered Zita. ‘That is why I am at Prickwillow. I cannot get away. Jewel could not pull the laden van along the drove; and if other horses were attached to it, everything would be shaken to pieces.’

Presently Jewel came to a halt.

‘Shall I jump out and urge him on?’ asked Mark.

‘No ; he is breathing. He will go on again presently.’

‘And whilst he is breathing, we will talk. Conversation is impossible when we are bumping into ruts and bouncing over clods. If this be travelling when there is snow half-choking the wheelruts and levelling the clods, what must it be at other times?’

‘You see I am a prisoner at Prickwillow. I cannot get away without the loss of all my possessions.’

‘I see that now.’

Presently Mark said, ‘Zita, why were you on the river with Pip Beamish the other day?’

‘I hired him with half a pound of bird’s eye to punt me up stream. He behaved unfair ; he went off and left me.’

‘And I had to bring you back—and mighty cross you were. Was that because Beamish had left you?’

‘I had cause to be cross when Beamish took

the bird's eye and did not half do the job. Now cling hard ; Jewel is moving forward, and we must hold to our seats to save being tumbled about and broken to bits.'

Mark was on one side of the van, Zita on the other. He put out his hand to the curtains at one lurch, and roused Zita to remonstrance.

'The curtains are for ornament, and are not to be touched. They are of velvet plush. I don't want to have your great hand marking them. Lay hold of a rail. No! not a gold tassel ; you would pull that down, and maybe bring away the whole concern. Oh!'

This exclamation was provoked by the off wheel sinking into a rut, the depth of which seemed unfathomable. The movement of the van was like that of the mail steamer that runs from Dover to Calais, in a chopping sea. At one bound Zita was propelled forward, and, had she not clung to the ribs of the vehicle, would have been shot head foremost against

the opposite side of the van, with the result of either perforating that side or of flattening her skull against it.

Then, at the recoil lurch, Mark was projected in the opposite direction, and was nearly cast into Zita's lap.

'I say, Zita, the exertion is prodigious!' exclaimed the lad. 'I think I should prefer to walk.'

'But the honour is so great,' gasped Zita. 'It is not every day you can ride in such a conveyance as this, and have velvet curtains flapping, and gold tassels bobbing about your head.'

'I'll try to think of it in that light.'

'Besides,' pursued Zita, 'a shake up is as good as medicine to the insides. It puts them on their good behaviour. They are so tremendous afraid of having it again.'

'But surely progress in this affair is not always like this.'

‘Of course not. It is only in the Fens there are droves. It was bad at times where a highway had been new stoned. Then father and I clung to the perishables.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘We took them in our arms, or held them. If we were bruised, it did not matter; we mend up according to nature; but pots and pans don’t. We always lost something, though. There was that tea-kettle that troubled father’s last hours—it got a hole in it going over a bit of new road.’

This conversation took place in fits and starts, between the joltings of the van. Presently Jewel thought he had sufficiently exerted himself; he heaved a long sigh, looked back over his shoulder, and stood still.

‘There, now,’ said Runham, pulling a large red, white-spotted kerchief from his pocket and mopping his brow, ‘Jewel is breathing, and so may we. This is agonies.’

‘I call it pleasure,’ said Zita. ‘It must be, because it isn’t business.’

‘What did the horse mean by looking back at us, as he did just now when he sighed?’

‘Oh, he thinks it is his duty, now father’s gone, to keep an eye on us.’

‘I suppose, if I were to square accounts, as the other day’—

‘He’d have an apoplexy. For goodness’ sake don’t.’

‘I say, why did you go with Pip Beamish when you would not go with me?’

‘I did not go with Beamish. He came with me because I hired him. Tell me what took you to Red Wings? Had you an account to serve there?’

Mark became grave. He fidgeted on his seat. He was an honest, open-hearted fellow, and disliked prevarication, but there was hesitation, there was evasion in his reply.

‘I have business of all sorts with all kinds of people.’

‘That is no answer. I want to know why you went to the mill to see Kainie.’

Mark rested his chin in his hand and considered.

‘I don’t mind saying so much,’ he answered, ‘but let it be between us alone. There is a sort of a tie between her and me—a sort of a tie, you know.’

‘I know nothing.’

‘I can’t give you particulars. It’s all right,—if you knew, you would say so too,—but I can’t tell you more about it; and it’s a tie can’t be got rid of.’

Further explanation was interrupted, for a head and pair of shoulders appeared in front between the curtains.

‘Oh! you, Runham—and that Cheap Jack girl! Which is it to be—she or Kainie? It shall not be both.’

Pip Beamish was there, glowering at Mark from under his bushy eyebrows.

‘Take care!’ said Beamish, thrusting a long arm into the van. ‘Take care what you are about. If you hurt one hair of the head of Kainie, I’ll shoot you through the heart. I’ve time on my hands now. I’m turned out of my mill by the Commissioners, and can choose my occasion. I shall watch you. One or other—leave my Kainie alone and stick to *her*.’ He indicated Zita with one hand.

‘Pip,’ said Mark, flushing very red, ‘do not talk nonsense!’

‘Nonsense?’ repeated Beamish; ‘that is how you rich men treat these matters—sport and nonsense; but to us it is heartbreak and despair. What have I but my one ewe lamb? I have been expelled my mill because you Commissioners think I’m a dangerous chap. You ain’t far wrong there. I’m dangerous to such as you who are evil-doers. Take care, you Cheap Jack

girl, and make not yourself cheap to such as Runham. He is free in his wealth to do as he pleases. If he be the ruin of you, trusting in him, will he lose his Commissioner's place? If he destroy my happiness by bringing harm on my Kainie, will the laws touch him? I may not take a straw from his stables, but he may rob me of my Kainie. He is rich—I am poor.'

'Pip! you are the man I desire to see. I will speak to you of this matter. Judge nothing before you hear me; and you, Zita, do not you place any weight on his words—they are bitter and false.'

'Bitter,' repeated Pip, 'but not false. Nothing that you can say will change my mind. Nothing will alter my purpose. I warn you against an injury to Kainie. You rich men of the Fens do not seek a poor girl to raise her head and set her up on high among yourselves, but to humble her in the dust.'

He laughed a fierce, scornful laugh.

‘I cannot say—you Cheap Jack Zita. They report that you have money and goods. Have you told him how much? If it be worth his while, he will be honourable towards you. It is all a matter of calculation. If you ain’t worth much, he’ll throw you over, as he would throw over Kainie when tired of her. Best take care! If you dare!’

The man’s eyes glared with white heat, and he thrust his long arm towards Mark with clenched fist.

‘Pip,’ exclaimed Mark, ‘you are the man I have been wanting to see. I will come out to you.’

He jumped out of the van. ‘Your words are folly.’ Then, ‘You drive home without me, Zita. I told you I had business with all sorts of persons; now I have business with Ephraim—business of much consequence. May you get safe back in that rattletrap, and not be shaken to bits!’

‘Rattletrap? Oh, if Jewel heard you!’ She spoke as laughing, to disguise her inward trouble.

No sooner, however, was Mark gone than she broke down and cried.

But her tears did not last long.

‘He’s venomous. He don’t know all. I do trust Mark. Besides—I’ve the van and money.’

CHAPTER XVIII

A DROP OF GALL

WHAT did Mark Runham mean by his conduct?

He had left Zita to go after that fellow, Pip Beamish, and they were together on the embankment in close confabulation. The girl looked after them from between the red curtains, and could see Beamish gesticulating with his long arms. He was excited, he was speaking with vehemence, and at intervals Mark interrupted him.

Something that Mark had said seemed to have struck the orator with surprise. He dropped his arms and stood like a figure of wood. He let Mark lay his hand on his shoulder and draw him along, speaking rapidly into his ear.

What this meant was plain to Zita. The two men were rivals for Kainie of Red Wings. They had been disputing; Beamish hot and impatient, and unwilling to listen to the other. What was Kainie? A she-miller, as Zita put it, and ineligible as a wife to such as Runham. Among fen-farmers no one marries for mere love; money or land is the substance for which they crave. If a little love be sprinkled on the morsel, so much the better, but it is no essential—it is a condiment. Zita tossed her head. She was not a beggarly miller! She had the van and its contents, red curtains and gold tassels. She had money as well—the profits of fair-days at Swaffham, Huntingdon, Wisbeach, Cambridge, and Ely. She had a good deal of money in her box—none suspected how much. Of course her wealth would not compare with that of a fen-farmer, but it was enough to place her immeasurably above Kainie, and within reach of Mark if he chose to stoop a little—just a little.

Zita turned the head of Jewel homewards. Mark did not follow her to say farewell. He had given her no thanks for the jolting and jumbling in the conveyance to which she had treated him, though 'good as medicine to his insides.'

Zita was angry with the young man. She did not relish the thought that he came to see her one day and went to Kainie the next—nay, that he visited both in the same afternoon.

It was true that he had made no overtures to Zita—said nothing definite relative to his condition of heart; but he had kissed her, and would have done so again had she not warned him that it would give the horse an apoplectic fit. He had shown her plainly that he liked her company, and that he was unhappy if he did not see her daily.

His attentions had been noticed. Mrs. Tun-kiss had commented on them, and the girl with St. Vitus' dance had made a joke about them.

His visit that day to Prickwillow would

inevitably have been seen. The unusual sight of the van out on an airing must have attracted attention. And if the van had been seen, those who saw it were certain to speak of it to those who did not. That expedition would come to the ears of Drownlands.

Knowing what she did, Zita was able to account for the dislike Drownlands showed to the presence of Mark Runham. The sight of the young man was a sting to his conscience. He would be afraid lest Zita, in conversation with him, might let drop something about the events of the night on which Jake Runham died.

But Zita was woman enough to see that there was another reason why the master of Prickwillow eyed the young fellow with dislike. He was jealous of him. Zita perceived that Drownlands liked her, at the same time that he feared her. She could discern in the expression of his eye, read in his consideration for her comfort, decipher in the quiver of his lips when Mark's

name was mentioned, that his regard for her was deep, and that his dislike of Mark was due to jealousy.

Zita was accustomed to admiration ; she had received a good deal of it in her public life, and regarded it with contemptuous indifference ; but the admiration she had met with in market and fair had been outspoken ; this of Drownlands was covert. Hitherto she had accepted it from her vantage-ground—the platform of her own habitation ; now she was at a disadvantage—the inmate of the house of the man who looked on her with admiration.

She turned her thoughts again in the direction of Mark. What were the ties binding him to Kainie, of which he spoke ?

On consideration, she thought she could understand. Mark had fallen in love with the girl at the mill when in hobbledehoydom, and had stupidly plunged into an engagement. Boys are fools ; and he was but just emerged from

boyhood. His father's death had knocked the nonsense out of his head, and brought him to the consciousness that he had made a blunder. He was now a rich farmer; Kainie had nothing of her own but the clothes she stood up in. Moreover, he had since seen Zita, and had become sincerely attached to her. So long as he was tied to that miller-girl, he could not speak of his wishes and purposes to Zita. He was in a dilemma; he was an honourable fellow, and could not break his word to Kainie. Mark was laying the case before Pip Beamish, and was inviting Pip to take Kainie off his hands, and set him free to speak out to Zita.

‘Well,’ thought the girl, as she put up Jewel in his stable, ‘we all do foolish things; some of us do wrong things at times in our life. I have done both in one—I sold a box of paste-cutters at one and nine that cost father two shillings. I’ve had that threepence as hot coppers on my soul ever since. Well! I hope

Pip Beamish will take Kainie. He loves her, and he's suited to her—both are millers; one has nothing and the other nought—so they are fitted for a match. I'll help matters on, or try to do so. I'll see Kainie, and have a deal with her—she is but one of the general public after all. I daresay she likes Pip quite as much as Mark, and is doubting in her mind which to have. I know what I can throw in to turn the scale.'

Accordingly, when the van had been consigned to its shed and the curtains removed to her room, Zita knitted her fingers behind her back and surveyed her goods, moving from one group of wares to another.

After some consideration, she descended the stairs and prepared to leave the house.

Mrs. Tunkiss peered out of the kitchen as she heard her step, and said—

'Going to meet the master—be you?'

A malevolent smile was on her face.

‘No, Mrs. Tunkiss. I do not know in which direction he has ridden.’

‘You’d like to know, would you? You’d go and meet him, and he’d jump off his horse and walk alongside of you, and say soft things. Oh my! The master! Ki Drownlands say soft things!’

The woman burst into a cackling laugh.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Zita, reddening with anger at the insult implied in the woman’s words.

‘Oh, miss, I mean nothing to offend. But I’d like to know what the master will say to your carawaning about with Mark Runham—what the master will say to your receiving visits from young men in the poultry-house.’

‘That is no concern of yours; and for the matter of that, I care nothing what he thinks.’

‘Oh dear no! But folks can’t carry on with two at once. Two strings to a bow may be all very well in some things. I don’t mean to say

that you shouldn't sow clover with your corn and so have both a harvest of wheat and one of hay; but with us poor women that don't do. If it be a saying that we should have two strings to one bow, there is another, that there's many a slip between the cup and the lip.'

Zita pushed past the insolent woman.

Mrs. Tunkiss shouted after her, 'Strange goings on—so folks say. There's Mark Runham running after two girls, sweethearting both; and there's one girl—I names no names—running after two men, and I bet she catches neither.'

Then she slammed the kitchen door.

CHAPTER XIX

NO DEAL

THE insolence of the housekeeper made Zita for a while very angry. It followed so speedily on the scene in the van with Ephraim Beamish.

Her cheek burned as though it had been struck, and her pulses throbbed. She would like to have beaten Mrs. Tunkiss with one of the flails; but with creatures of that sort it is best not to bandy words, certainly not to give them the advantage by losing temper and acting with violence.

Zita did not long harbour her resentment. She had other matters to occupy her mind beside Mrs. Tunkiss.

The air was fresh and bracing to the spirits as well as to the body. Zita walked on with elastic tread, for she had recovered her good humour. She wore a neat white straw bonnet trimmed with black, and a white kerchief was drawn over her shoulders and bosom. Her gown was black. She looked remarkably handsome. She had been accustomed to wear her gowns short, and her neat ankles were in white stockings. She was strongly shod; the snow brushed all the gloss off her shoes, but it was not whiter than her stockings. She walked along with a swing of the shoulders and a toss of the head that were peculiar to her, and characteristic of her self-confidence. The winter sun was setting, and sent its red fire into her face; it made her hair blaze, and brought out the apricot richness of her complexion.

When she reached the brick platform of Red Wings, Wolf did not bark, but ran to her, wagging his tail. She had not forgotten him.

From her pocket she produced some bread. Then, in acknowledgment, he uttered a couple of sharp barks, and thrust his head against her hand for a caress.

Kerenhappuch, hearing the barks, came out and saluted Zita cordially.

‘That’s fine,’ said she. ‘Step inside. I was just going to brew some tea.’

‘I’m here on business,’ answered Zita. ‘Let me sit down on one side of the fire and we’ll talk about it. Let’s deal.’

‘Deal? What do you mean?’

Zita drew a stool to the fireside. The turf glowed red. The stool was low; when she seated herself, her knees were as high as her bosom. She folded her arms round them and closed her hands, lacing her fingers together and looking smilingly over her knees at Kainie, with a gleam in her face of expectant triumph. Kainie knelt at the hearth and put on the kettle. She turned her head and watched Zita, whose

features were illumined by the fire glow, as they had been shortly before by that of the setting sun. Kerenhappuch could not refrain from saying, 'What an uncommon good-looking girl you are!'

'Yes, so most folks say,' responded Zita, with indifference; 'and I suppose I am that.'

Kainie was somewhat startled at this frank acceptance of homage. She pursed up her lips and offered no further compliments.

'I suppose Pip Beamish is sweet on you,' said Zita,—'tremenjous?'

'Poor fellow!' sighed the girl of the mill. 'Perhaps he is, but it is no good. He has not got even a mill to look after now, and I have barely enough wage to keep me alive. What is more, the Commissioners are against him, and won't let him get any work in the fen any more.'

'Then let him go out of the fen.'

'Out of the fen?' exclaimed Kainie. 'How

you talk! As if a fen-man could do that! You don't find frogs on top of mountains, nor grow bulrushes in London streets. That ain't possible.'

'But there are fens elsewhere.'

'Where?'

'I do not know. In America, I suppose. There is all sorts of country there, to suit all sorts of people. I'd go there if I were he.'

'If there are fens in America, that's another matter. But what is it you want with me, now, partick'ler?'

Zita settled herself in her seat.

'I've come to have a deal with you,' she said chirpily. 'That is what I have come about.'

'But—what do you want of me?'

'We will come to that presently,' said the Cheap Jack girl, and with her usual craft or experience she added, 'I will let you know what my goods are before I name the price.'

'Price—money? I have no money.'

‘It is not money I want.’

‘I do not fancy there’s anything I require,’ said Kerenhappuch. ‘And that is fortunate, for I have not only no money to buy with, but no place where I could stow away a purchase.’

‘Nobody knows what they wants till they see things or hear about them,’ said Zita. ‘Bless you! if you were as well acquainted with the British public as father and me, you’d say that. Take it as a rule, folks always set their heads on having what they never saw before, didn’t know the use of, and don’t know where to put ’em when they have ’em. I’m telling you this, though it is not to my advantage. Now, what do you say to a ream of black-edged paper and mourning envelopes to match? — that’s twenty quires, you know.’

‘I write to nobody. I have no relations but my Uncle Drownlands, and he never speaks to me — won’t notice me. I am not likely to write letters to him.’

‘Then what do you say to a garden syringe? If you have a pail of soapsuds, it is first-rate for green-fly. Father sold several to gentlefolks with conservatories.’

‘But I don’t belong to the gentlefolks, nor have I got a conservatory.’

‘No,’ said Zita, rearranging herself on her scat. ‘But if you wanted to keep folks off your platform, you could squirt dirty water over them.’

‘I have Wolf. He is sufficient.’

‘Well,’ said Zita, with a slight diminution of buoyancy in her spirits and of confidence in her tone, ‘then I’ll offer you what I would not give every one the chance of having. I offer it to you as a particular friend. It’s an epergne.’

‘An epergne? What’s that?’

‘It is a sort of an ornament for a dinner-table. I will not tell you any lies about it. Father got it in a job lot, and cheap considering how splendid it is. It is not the sort of goods we go

in for. It lies rather outside our line of business ; and yet there's no saying whether it might not hit the fancy of General Jackass—I mean the public—that was father's way of talking of it. You really can't tell what won't go down with him. Will you have the epergne ?'

'I'm not General Jackass, and I won't have it.'

'But consider—if you was to give a dinner-party, and'—

'What ? in the mill ?'

'No ; when you marry a rich man.'

'If I have any man, it will be a poor one.'

'Then,' said Zita in a caressing tone, 'I know what you really must have, and what there is no resisting. It is the beautifullest little lot of perfumes. They're all in a glass box, with cotton wool, and blue ribbons round their necks. There's Jockey Club—there's Bergamot—there's Frangipani—there's New-mown Hay — there's White Heliotrope, and there's Lavender too.'

I am sure there is yet another ; yes, Mignonette. One for every day of the week. Think of that ! You can scent yourself up tremenjous, and a different scent every day of the week. You cannot refuse that.'

'But,' said Kainie, with a wavering in her tone, a token of relaxation in resistance to the allurements presented to her imagination, 'what do you want for this?'

'One thing only.'

'What is that?'

'Give up Mark.'

'Mark Runham?'

'Yes. Mark Runham. Is it a deal between us? Now listen.' Zita held up one hand, and began again with the catalogue of perfumes. There is Jockey Club for Sunday ;' she touched her thumb. 'There is Bergamot for Monday ;' she touched the first finger. 'There is Frangipani for Tuesday, and New-mown Hay for Wednesday'—

‘Give up Mark?’ Kainie interrupted the list.

‘What do you mean?’

‘What I mean is this,’ said Zita : ‘Mark told me that he was tied to you somehow.’

‘He did? It is true.’

‘But I want you to throw him up. Let him go free. Say that there is no bond between you. Think how you will smell, if you do! White Heliotrope on Thursday, then Lavender on Friday, and Mignonette on Saturday.’

‘Did Mark say how we were tied—bound?’

‘No ; he only told me there was such a tie.’

‘And Mark—did he set you to ask this?’

‘No, not exactly. It is my idea. Now do. You shall have all the perfumes. Consider how on Sunday you will make the Baptist Chapel smell of Jockey Club!’

‘Give up Mark? Break the bond? I can’t. I could not, even if I would.’

CHAPTER XX

DAGGING

WHEN Zita returned to Prickwillow, Lee-hanna Tunkiss, with a malicious leer, said, 'The master is upstairs, and would like to speak with you ;' then, with a sidelong look at the maid-of-all-work and a giggle, she curtseyed and added ' Miss.'

Zita ascended leisurely to her room, removed her bonnet and changed her shoes, put on an apron, and then proceeded to Drownlands' office. She did not hurry herself. She sauntered along the passage and hummed a folk-melody—' High Germany.' She stayed to shut a bedroom door that was ajar and swinging in the draught. She trifled with a canary that hung in a window.

The office door was open. She knew that Drownlands had heard her come in, had heard Mrs. Tunkiss inform her that she was wanted, heard her ascend the stairs. She knew that he was waiting with impatience whilst she removed bonnet and shoes, that he was chafing at the leisurely manner in which she approached his den.

After a while she tapped at the half-open door in careless fashion, threw it open and stood in the doorway, and shrugged her shoulders, then rubbed her hands as though they were cold.

‘Mrs. Tunkiss said you required my presence.’

‘You have taken your time in coming.’ Drownlands was at his table; he had been biting his fingers. There was a sheet of blotting paper on the board; he had scratched it, torn four strips out of it with his nails. His face was troubled and was working. ‘Why did you not come at once?’

‘I had to remove my shoes ; they were wet. I did not suppose you were in much of a hurry.’

‘Come inside. Why do you stand in the doorway?’

She obeyed.

‘Well, is it necessary to leave the door wide open behind you?’

She closed the door.

‘Shut it, I say.’

She obeyed, and leaned her back against the valve, crossed her feet, and put her hands behind her on the handle.

‘Where have you been?’ asked Drownlands imperiously.

‘To Red Wings, to see your niece. You don’t know her. It is a pity. You should look after her ; she is your own relation. She is not bad in her way, but awfully poor—and pig-headed too, which poor people oughtn’t to be, because they can’t afford it. I went to have

a deal with her, but it was of no use. She would do no business with me.'

'Oh, you have gone back to your old profession of Cheap Jack, have you?'

'I never left it off. I Cheap Jack in my sleep and make thundering profits. It is disappointing to wake in the morning and see all the goods—and damaged ones too—on the shelves where they were the night before, after I had sold them off in my dreams at twenty-five and thirty per cent. profits. There's an epergne has been the nightmare to father and me. I wanted Kainie to take it, but she wouldn't. Suppose you buy it and present it to her, and so make peace and love between you?'

'Have done. I told you I did not wish you to know her.'

'But I went on business, and my time was wasted.'

'You have also been with that — that fellow.'

‘Yes, with Mark. I took him out for a drive.’

‘In the road, in the van?’

‘Yes; the van wanted sweetening. The fowls have been roosting on it, and have treated it shamefully.’

‘Be silent. What are you playing with behind your back?’

‘I am playing with nothing. I am always at work or doing business. I never play.’

‘And what work or business are you engaged on now?’

‘I am polishing the handle of the door.’

‘You not play? You never play?’ exclaimed Drownlands, starting to his feet. ‘You are always at play, and I am your sport. You play me as a fish, you dagg me like a pike. Look at this.’

He went to the corner of his room, and from the collection there thrown together produced a singular weapon or tool, locally termed a gleve.

‘Do you know the use of this?’

‘No.’

‘It is for playing,’ said Drownlands bitterly. ‘See, there are six knives tied together by the handles at the head, and all the blades have been jagged like saws, the teeth set backwards. Can you guess its purpose?’

‘No; it’s not a woman’s tool.’

‘It is for playing—playing with pike. You take this and dagg into the water; you dagg and dagg, and bring up a pike or an eel wedged between these blades, cut into by these fangs. He cannot free himself; the more he twists and turns, the deeper into his flesh bite these teeth, and the greater is his anguish of heart. That is play—play for him who does the dagging, not for the poor fish that is speared. And, Zita, such is your play. With your fingers, with your tongue, with your brown eyes, you dagg for me, and I am the miserable wretch whom you torture. It may be fun to you’

‘I do not make sport with you, master,’ said Zita, with placidity of feature and evenness of tone in strong contrast with his working face and quivering voice.

‘You are at that handle again. Polishing it! Leave off, or you will drive me mad. Can you not for one moment desist from tormenting me? You seek out occasion, means, to twang my every nerve, and give me pain.’

‘Master Drownlands, listen to me,’ said Zita. ‘You are quite in the wrong when you say that I dagg for you. Lawk-a-biddy! I dagg for you? On the contrary, it is you who are dagging for me, and I have to dodge to this side, then to that, from your gleve, and as I happen to be sharp of eye and nimble in movement, you do not catch me. That is how the matter stands, and not at all as you represent it.’

‘Who suffers?’ asked Drownlands fiercely. ‘Is it you, or is it I? You stand there, composed and complacent, rubbing up my door-

handle behind your back, and all the while I am in torture. You cannot speak to me but you stick a dart ; you cannot look at me but I feel the knife cutting ; your very laugh causes a wound, and your weapons are all poisoned, and the gashes fester. Here am I' (he flung the gleeve back into the corner with an oath), 'your victim, your sport—in suffering.'

He returned to the table.

'Sit down,' said the girl. 'Do not work yourself into a passion. There's no occasion for that. Let us come to business.'

'Yes,' said Drownlands ; 'that is the only way to deal with you. You have a sorry, commercial mind. Everything to you must be a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence.'

'That is the only way with me,' said Zita. 'I was brought up to trade, and I love to drive a bargain. That, if you like it, is sport ; it is sport and business squeezed into one.'

'I will stand here,' said the man. 'You stand

there by the door, if you will ; only, I beseech you, leave off polishing that cursed handle, and reckoning, as I suppose you are, how many farthings to charge me for it. As you say that you love business, to business we will go. As nothing affects you but what is presented to your mind in a monetary light, to moneys we will proceed. We also will have a deal.'

'By all means,' said Zita, with a sigh of relief. 'Now I am on my own ground. Do you want to buy, sell, or barter?'

He did not answer immediately. He folded his arms and stood by the window jamb, looking over his shoulder at her.

The dusk had set in after the set of sun, but a silvery grey light suffused the room, the reflection of the snow on the ground. In this light he could see Zita. She had withdrawn her hands from the knob, and had them raised to her bosom, and was rubbing one palm against the other leisurely. A fine, clean-built girl.

He also was a fine man, with strongly-cut features, picturesque, with his long black hair, his swarthy complexion, his sturdy frame, and the tiger-skin slung across his shoulders.

‘Now I am ready,’ said Zita.

He did not speak. He felt that much, everything, depended on what he said, and how he said it. His breath came quick, and his brow was beaded with perspiration.

‘You are slow about it,’ said Zita. ‘Father took an agency once for an *Illustrated History of the War*. It was to be in twenty parts, at half a crown a part, and four beautiful steel engravings in each, of battles, and generals, and towns. That *Illustrated War* was such a long time in progress that some of the subscribers died, and others moved away, and some went bankrupt, and there was no getting their money out of some of the others. Father never would have anything more to do with concerns that did not go off smart like the snap of a percus-

sion cap. It seems to me that this business of yours is going to be as long and tiresome as that of the *Illustrated War*.'

'You are dagging at me again,' said Drownlands sullenly.

'I cannot speak a word but it takes you contrariways,' observed the girl.

He left the window and came to the table, leaned his hand on it, and stood with his back to the light. Still unable to make up his mind to speak, or how to speak, he began to tear up the blotting-paper into little pieces and to throw them about, some on the floor, some on the board. When the last fragment had left his fingers—

'Zita,' he said in loud and vehement tones, 'I suppose I am twice your age.'

'I should fancy more than that—a good deal.'

'Be silent and listen to me.' He raised his voice. 'I am rich. I have a large tract of land—fen-land. I have turned over every turf, and

under each found gold. But it has not made me happy. I have had many contradictions, many sorrows, and some shame. My life has been blistered and full of running sores. I have ever been seeking and never finding, till I saw you. When you came into my house, then I knew at once that it was you I had craved for and longed after, and that you, and you alone, could give me what I can find nowhere else—happiness.’

‘Give?’ said Zita. ‘I thought this was a business matter.’

‘Let me buy my happiness, then, at what price you desire. I have told you what I am worth. When I see you, I feel the fire kindles in my heart ; when I do not see you, it smoulders ; and now—now I speak, it breaks out into raging flames.’

‘I must leave this place, or you will go clean crazy.’

‘No, you must not—you shall not leave it!

I could not live without you, having once seen you. Zita, I must have you !'

'Me?' said Zita. 'With me go the van and the goods.'

'Curse the van !'

'You must not say that. The van is very fine, if the poultry would but leave it alone ; and with the curtains and tassels is fit for a king.'

'Zita, it is you only that I want.'

'There are a lot of goods goes with me—scrubbing-brushes, mops, brooms, door-mats, pots and pans. Then there's Jewel—who is not bad when he does go.'

'You are trifling with me again. Listen to me. Hear me to the end.'

'I want to hear the end and have done with it,' said the girl. 'I was reckoning up the articles. Here's Cheap Jack Zita for one ; there are all these promiscuous goods, that's two ; here's the van, that's three ; and there's Jewel, that's four—a job lot.'

‘You are mocking me.’

‘No indeed, I am not. We are after business, are we not?’

But Zita was purposely protracting the scene. She was in difficulties, and was searching to find a way out of them.

‘Yes, business. You are mercantile. Listen to what I offer. I am rich, a man of consequence, and a Commissioner. Here is the house, here is the land. I have money in the bank—thousands of pounds; all—all I have is yours; give me but your own self in return.’

Zita was far from being unfeeling. She was stirred by the earnestness, the devotion of the man, but she was not for a moment doubtful as to what her answer must be. Commercial though her mind was, she could not accept him at his price. Her scruple was how to word her refusal so as least to wound him. In her peculiar fashion—one inveterate to her—she

twisted the matter about so as to give it a comical aspect. She saw no other loophole for escape from a difficult and painful situation.

‘I am sorry,’ she said, ‘that number one in the job lot is not to be parted with. That is withdrawn from the sale, or bought in. But if it is any consolation to you to have the van and a share of the goods’—

‘That is no consolation to me.’

‘A queer state of mind to be in—an unwholesome one, and looks like derangement of intellects. The van ought to comfort any man with his faculties about him.’

‘Zita!’ exclaimed Drownlands, striking the table with his fist, ‘you persist in fooling with me! I will not endure this. I am in deadly earnest. I know the reason of this trifling. Mark Runham’—he choked with passion—‘Mark has stepped in, and you have given him that heart which you deny me—a heart I would give worlds—worlds’— He turned to the

window. It was starlight now, starlight over snowfields. 'Look out, Zita, at the stars. It is said that they are worlds. If all these were mine, and filled with unimaginable masses of treasure, the homes of unexampled happiness, I would give all for you—all for you—listen to me—merely that I might call you mine, and then die.'

'I cannot be yours,' said Zita in a firm voice. 'And now that you have said this, I shall leave the house.'

'You shall not leave this house!' he cried fiercely. 'If you attempt it,—if I see that you are about to attempt it—and I know whither you would go,—then I will shoot you first, and myself afterwards.'

'I have to do, then, with a madman?'

'Be it so—with a madman; mad on one matter only, mad for one thing only—you. I make no empty threat. I swear by these stars I will do what I threaten. I cannot and I will

not live without you. I will kill you rather than that you should belong to another.'

Zita came forward from the door, came to the table.

'I can never be yours,' she said in a tone as earnest, as grave as his. 'There is that between us which makes it for ever impossible.'

'What is the *that*—Mark Runham?'

'No—not Mark Runham.'

'Who is it, then?'

'There is no *who*. There is a *something*. Must I tell you what it is? I would gladly spare you.'

'Tell me, and torment me no more.'

She stepped to the corner of the room, took the flail up, and cast it on the table between them.

'The *something* is that flail.'

Suddenly through the window smote a red flare; it kindled the room, it turned Zita's hair into a ruddy aureole, it streamed over the table, and dyed the flail blood-red.

And Drownlands cast himself on his knees, with a cry of anguish and remorse, and buried his face in his hands.

Then through the house sounded a hubbub of voices, and cries for the master.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FEN RIOTS

SEVERAL and various causes had combined to produce discontent in the Fens.

Those who lived by fishing and fowling were angry because the improved drainage had destroyed their sporting grounds. Those who had been left behind in the scramble for land were discontented because others had seized the advantageous moment for purchasing which they had let slip.

The labourers were discontented because of the lowness of the wage and the high price of corn. How was it possible for a man on ten or eleven shillings a week to maintain a family, when wheat was at four to five shillings a stone?

It is proverbial that such as have risen from poverty prove the harshest masters. Such was the case in the Fens. The landowners were related by blood and marriage to the labourers they employed, but, nevertheless, they ground them under their own heels. A specimen of their brutality may be instanced. Twice or thrice the wheat had to be hoed, and the hoers were women. Over them the farmers set a ganger armed with an ox goad, who thrust on the lagging women with a prod between the shoulderblades.

The men were paid partly in money, partly in corn, and were given the refuse wheat that would not sell, wheat that had been badly harvested, and had sprouted in the ear, wheat that made heavy and unwholesome bread.

Labour in the Fens was of a specially trying nature. The clayer was underground all day in pits throwing up the marl that was to serve as manure to the surface earth, and was half

stified by the noxious exhalations from the decomposing vegetable matter, and was immersed half-way up his calves in fetid, phosphorescent ooze.

The cleaning out and deepening of the dykes was trying work, for the workman was plunged to his waist in stagnant water and slime, tormented by mosquitoes, and poisoned by the stings of the terrible gadfly that threw him into fever for a fortnight. Everything was poisonous. The fen-water entering a cut produced gangrene. If the hand or foot were wounded by a reed, a sore was the result that resisted healing.

The expenses of the fen-labourer were heavy. He could not do the tasks set him without a pair of well-tanned leather boots reaching to the hips, that cost him from thirty-six shillings to two pounds the pair.

His comforts were small, and were disregarded by the landowners. His cottage, though quite modern, was supremely wretched. It had been

run up at the least possible expense, one brick thick, and one room deep, on piles. But 'the moor' beneath the surface had shrunk through the drainage, and the walls gaped, letting wind and rain drive through the rents, and frost enter, impossible to expel by the largest fire.

There was then, as there is now, and always will be, a body of social failures—fraudulent dealers detected and exposed, but not shamed, men who, through their sourness of temper, or indolence, or dishonesty, had failed in whatever they took in hand. These were ready-made demagogues, all talkers, all dissatisfied with every person and thing save themselves, accusing every institution of corruption, and every person of injustice, because of their own incompetence. They were in their element when real discontent prevailed on account of real wrongs. They rose into influence as agitators; they worked on the minds of the ignorant peasantry, dazzling them with expecta-

tions impossible to be realised, and exciting them to a frenzy of anger against all who were in any way their superiors. These men were rarely sincere in their convictions. They were for the most part unscrupulous fishers in troubled waters. Of the few that were sincere, Ephraim Beamish was one.

All the elements of dissatisfaction were combined at the period of our tale, and the high price of wheat produced an explosion ; but it was Ephraim Beamish who applied the match.

He had been expelled his office as keeper of a mill by the Commissioners, and his enforced idleness gave him leisure to pass from one centre of discontent to another, to stir up the embers, fan them to a white heat, and organise a general outbreak. On a preconcerted day, the labourers rose, and with them was combined a large body of men of no particular calling, who had no particular grievance, and no particular end in view.

No suspicion of danger was entertained by the employers, and when the dissatisfied broke out in open riot, they were taken by surprise and were unprepared to offer resistance.

Bodies of men assembled at Mildenhall, Soham, Isleham, Downham, and Littleport, and the order was given that they were to march upon Ely, and on their way were to extort from the farmers promise of higher wage and cheaper corn. In Ely contributions were to be exacted from the Bishop, the canons, and all the wealthy and well-to-do citizens. The mills were to be wrecked and the banks plundered.

At the head of the whole movement was Beamish, but he was more especially to act as commander over the Littleport detachment.

Having got the men together,—the poachers and wild-duck fowlers armed with their guns, the labourers with cudgels,—he endeavoured to marshal them into some sort of discipline and subjection to orders. But this he found more

difficult than to bring the men together. He found the men were not amenable to command, and were indisposed to confine themselves to exacting contributions. Fortified by their numbers, they attacked the grocer's shop, the vicarage, and the home of a retired farmer in Littleport, broke in the doors and pillaged them.

Having tasted the pleasures of plunder, they were prepared to sack and wreck any house whence they thought liquor or money was to be got.

It was in vain that Ephraim Beamish endeavoured to control the unwieldy body of men. *Quot homines, tot sententiæ.* And as each man in the disorderly love-feasts at Corinth had his prophecy, his psalm, and his interpretation, so in this assemblage of peasants, each had his opinion as to where lay the blame for the distress or discomfort under which he laboured, each had his private grudge to avenge, each his

special need which he sought to satisfy, and all were united in equal determination not to submit to dictation from Beamish or any other man.

The tavern at Littleport could hardly escape, although it had been a rendezvous of the dissatisfied. The mob rushed towards it to break in and seize on the contents of the cellar. In vain did Beamish protest that they were injuring a good cause by their disorderly conduct; all desired drink, and none paid heed to his remonstrance.

The taverner barely averted having his house looted by rolling a hogshead of ale out of his doors, and bidding the rioters help themselves.

Then Beamish sprang on a bench and entreated the men to attend to what he had to say.

‘We want no words,’ said one of the rioters. ‘We are dry, we want drink. We’ve empty pockets, and want to fill them. Our ears have

been stuffed with words. Keep them for chapel on Sundays.

‘I will speak,’ cried Beamish. ‘I am your leader. You have sworn to follow and obey me. You elected me yourselves.’

‘Lead us to liquor and sovereigns, and we’ll follow sharp enough.’

‘You are wasting time. You are damaging a righteous cause. Have we not to march to Ely? Have we not to visit the farmers on the way, and impose our terms there?’

‘There’s plenty of time for that, Pip.’

‘There is not plenty of time. The Mildenhall men are on their way under Cutman, five hundred strong.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘It was so planned. The Isleham men are marching under Goat, the Soham men under Gotobed. Who will be first in Ely? Is Littleport, that should lead the way, to come in at the tail?’

‘There is something in that, mates,’ shouted one of the rioters. ‘Stand in order, you chaps. To Ely! Bring along the waggon.’

The idea that, if looting were to be done, they of Littleport might come in merely to glean where others had reaped, and the consciousness that a far richer harvest was awaiting them in Ely than could be garnered in Littleport, acted as a stimulus, and the mob desisted from further violence, and roughly organised itself into marching order. All were armed after a fashion, with guns, pitchforks, cudgels, leap-ing-poles, and cleavers; and as the day was declining, there was a cry for torches.

‘We shan’t want them,’ called one of the men. ‘We’ll light bonfires on our way.’

Then a waggon was drawn out. In it were stationed some fowlers with duck-guns. The object of the waggon was to serve as a sort of fortress. Those in it were above the heads of the rest, and, in the event of resistance or

an attack, could fire over their heads. Moreover, the waggon would be serviceable to carry the spoil taken on the way, or gathered in Ely.

Then the mob rolled along the great drove or highway to the city, with shouts, and oaths, and laughter, and trampled the snow as it advanced, leaving a black slush behind it.

Many of the men were half intoxicated with the ale and spirits they had already imbibed, and all were wholly drunk with lust of gain and love of destruction.

Then one in the waggon shouted, 'To Crumb-land !' Another shouted, 'No, no ! Young Runham is not bad. He has sold his wheat cheap and thrashed out all his stacks. And the old woman is a widow.'

'That's nought,' exclaimed a third, 'if there's any liquor to be had there !'

'To Gaultrip's !' was the cry.

'Gaultrip is my cousin !' shouted another.

‘That’s nought,’ called one of the mob. ‘I suppose he has money.’

‘Ely way!’ roared Beamish, scrambling into the waggon. ‘Drive ahead. What’s the use of being the commander, if nobody listens to the word of command, and nobody thinks of obeying it, if he does hear it?’

CHAPTER XXII

TWENTY POUNDS

THE shrill voice of Mrs. Tunkiss was heard, as she ran screaming up the stairs, calling for 'the master.' Then she burst into his room, followed by the maid-of-all-work, who was in convulsive jerks.

'Oh, master! there is a riot. Some of our men have joined, and there is a stack on fire at Gaultrip's. The mob is coming here, and threatens to burn us.'

'Who are coming?' asked Drownlands, looking up. He staggered to his feet, but was as one dazed. He did not observe the glare in the room. He did not hear distinctly the words spoken.

‘Look, master! look at the blaze. It is at Gaultrip’s. You can hear them coming on. They are swearing horrible, and say they will have our lives.’

‘What is this all about?’

‘I don’t know for certain. Tom Easy has run here afore to tell us what he has gathered. But lawk! poor lad, he’s frightened; and me—my poor head won’t hold it. He says the mob be armed with bombs and cannons, and all sorts of engines of war, and they’ll blow us up into the skies.’

Drownlands passed his hand over his eyes, then went to the window and looked out.

He saw in the distance the red blaze of a burning rick, the flames dancing and leaping in the air, and carrying with them wisps of ignited straw, which were borne on the wind as fire-brands, to carry destruction elsewhere. He could see the mob advancing as a ripple of fire running along the drove before a dark wave.

The rioters had, in fact, twisted up bands of straw, had lighted them, and were waving them as torches as they advanced, and the flames were reflected in the dykes on each side of the road. Drownlands was surprised. He threw up the sash, and the roar of voices was carried into the room.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ asked he. ‘Who are these that are coming this way?’

‘It is the rioters,’ answered Mrs. Tunkiss.

‘Rioters? What rioters?’

‘Lawk! how can I tell? Tom Easy said they want advance of wages, and cheap flour. And he said, they ask for money to help on the cause.’

‘Cause? What cause?’

‘Lawk, sir! how can I say? Tom Easy said it was the Union of Fen Labourers, and they will have blood or money. They will make you swear to pay them two shillings a-day more

wage, and pull the price of flour down to half a crown.'

'They demand money of me, do they? Let them venture to require it of me.'

'Here they are!' screamed Mrs. Tunkiss, as a blow was levelled at the door, and the strokes resounded through the house.

'Who was that?' shouted Drownlands from the window, with a curse. He was not a man to spare oaths when he was angry. 'Who struck my door? I will have the law of . . .'

The mob was pouring into the yard.

'Make a blaze, and let us see the old tiger!' shouted one of the rioters, and bunches of straw and corn were snatched from a rick, a blaze was made, and fire tossed about, illumining the face of the house and the figures of the men in the waggon.

'By heaven, I know you!' shouted Drownlands from the window. 'That is Aaron Chevell in the waggon, and by him Isaac Harley and

Harry Tansley with guns. I'll not forget you. I have a memory. I have five ash trees on the drove side, and I shall have a rioter slung to every branch of every tree, and shall begin with my own workmen.'

'Hold a civil tongue in your head!' shouted Chevell from the waggon. 'Don't threaten what you can't perform. We have guns here, as you see, and can silence you; and we shan't think twice about doing so, if you do not come to our terms.'

'Master Drownlands!' called Ephraim Beamish, working his way forward in the waggon with his long arms, and leaning his elbows on the front board when he had thrust himself into the middle position, 'you will gain nothing by abuse and threats. We have a good cause, and are a thousand strong to support it. You have had everything in the Fens your own way too long and have trampled the working men under foot. You have coined their sweat into silver'—

Some one shouted as a correction, 'Into gold.'

'Yes,' said Beamish; 'you have coined the sweat of your men into heavy gold, and have left the men to hunger, and toil, and nakedness; to cramp, and ague, and fever. They have their rights as well as you. They have borne their wrongs long enough. Now they have risen to demand what in equity is theirs—some share of the profits, some just proportion out of your gains, so that they may live in comfort, and not barely live.'

'Shut your mouth!' roared one of the crowd; 'we want no preaching now. We know our rights, and we'll maintain them with our fists, and not with your tongue. Pip thinks he'll convert Tiger Ki, he does! Words won't do that. Send a shot at him, Tansley. That's the only argument for him.'

Tansley, the man addressed, thrust Beamish back with the butt-end of his fowling-piece, and laid his barrel on the front board.

‘Listen, Master Drownlands,’ shouted Beamish, again making an effort to shoulder his way to the front of the waggon. ‘What we ask of you is twenty pounds for the cause of the United Fen Labourers. Give us twenty pounds, and swear to the conditions—a fair wage and cheap corn. Then we will do you no harm whatever. We will take your money, and move along our way. We are bound for Ely.’

‘I pay you twenty pounds?’ yelled Drownlands. ‘I have a gun as well as you have, and will contribute lead to the cause—lead only.’

He ran to the corner of the room and took down his gun from the rack.

‘I’ll shoot,’ threatened Tansley.

‘Ay—and so will I,’ said Drownlands, ‘and let us see who can take the best aim. I think my eye is pretty well known to be sharp and my hand steady. By the Lord, I’ll not spare you!’ He paused and put on a hat. ‘I can see finely with all those wisps of fire. Hold up

your torches, boys, higher, that I may send my bullet into Tansley's heart. He will leap, and then down he goes.'

Fallen pieces of ignited straw had kindled the half-kneaded straw on the ground, and there ran flames and half-flames to and fro on the soil. The cart-horses in the waggon started and shifted position to escape these flashes and flickers.

'Drownlands!' shouted a young voice, and Mark Runham thrust his way through the crowd. 'I pray you be reasonable. You will provoke bloodshed.'

'What, you there? You a ringleader in riots?' exclaimed Drownlands, lowering his fowling-piece.

'I am not that. Let me come within.'

Then Mark stood on the waggon-shafts and called to the crowd—

'Refrain from violence! Leave me to manage Master Drownlands. I will engage him to let you have the money you require.'

Then he jumped down from the shafts and ran up the steps.

The door had been bolted and chained by the housekeeper, but Zita, hearing what Mark said, without waiting for orders, descended to the ground floor, and unbarred the door, and admitted him. He ran upstairs, for no time was to be lost. The mob was restless and irritated. It was impatient to be on its way to Ely, and yet was reluctant to leave Prickwillow without having drawn money from it, or done some mischief.

Drownlands was too angry to listen to advice. He would not hear of coming to terms with the rabble. He had been too long accustomed to domineer over the labourers to fear them now. He in no way realised how much courage is given by association in numbers.

‘What are you here for? How dare you enter uninvited?’ he exclaimed, as Mark came into the office, followed by Zita.

‘I admitted him,’ said the girl. ‘He has come in your interest.’

‘He is one of the rioters! He is a leader! A Runham of Crumbland, with a tail of dirty scoundrels after him, burning, pillaging, and getting drunk.’

‘I beseech you,’ said Mark—‘I entreat you to listen to reason. The men are, as you say, drunk — drunk with folly. I am no leader.’

‘You are acting for them.’

‘I am an intermediary. They have spared me. They came to Crumbland, but we humoured them, brought out cake and ale, and they went their way without molestation. Gaultrip resisted, and they set fire to a stack, and so frightened him that he yielded, and paid fifteen pounds. Now he is engaged in saving his other stacks. Do not provoke these fellows further.’

‘I will not listen to you. You ought to be

ashamed to take the part of these scurvy ragamuffins.'

'I am not taking their part, but yours. Hark!'

There was a cry from the yard of, 'Drownlands! Tiger Ki! We will break in the house door unless you give us money.'

Then a brick was thrown. It crashed through the double panes of the window with raised sash, and fell in the room, accompanied by a shower of glass splinters.

'I will shoot one of them!' exclaimed the yeoman, and he ran with his gun to the window.

Mark had just time to strike up the barrel, and the contents were discharged in the air, hurting nobody.

Drownlands turned on him with an oath.

'I will punish you,' he said, stamping with fury, and he rushed upon Mark with his gun raised over his head, grasping it by the barrel.

Then Zita sprang between them, holding the

flail in both her hands, as a ward against the stock.

‘Stand back, Mark!’ she cried. ‘He dare not touch you across this flail.’

It was as she said.

The man stood as one paralysed, the uplifted gun in his hands, his eyes glaring at young Runham, and the red reflections of the fire flashing on his face and turning it to blood. But the blow did not fall. His muscles remained immovable, the gun suspended in the air, till Zita lowered the flail, and put it behind her back. Then the spell was off him. He let the gun fall on the ground, and his head sank on his bosom.

The discharge of the fowling-piece had produced a hush in the voices outside.

None knew whether, in the darkness, some one had been hit. But when, after a pause, it was found that no harm had been done, then there broke forth loud cries and execrations; the courage of the rabble rose with a sense of its

immunity, and a rain of brickbats beat against the windows of the house, shivering the panes. The kitchen-maid fell on the floor in a fit. Mrs. Tunkiss went into a series of shrieks. Renewed blows were raised against the house door, and they were accompanied with cries of, 'Smash it in! Tear the tiger's house down! He has hundreds of pounds put away somewhere. If he will not pay twenty sovereigns when we ask civil, we will take two hundred.'

Then one shrill voice cried, 'Make a bonfire of the wheat ricks.'

'Ki Drownlands! will you do nothing?' asked Mark; 'will you not give up a few pounds to save those long ranges of stacks?'

'Let them do their worst,' answered the master of Prickwillow doggedly. 'By the light of the fire I will note every face, and mark them all down, man by man, and then woe betide them.'

Then a burst of cheers, and cries of, 'That

will do famously. We will have that out. Get horses, harness, and we will drive to Ely.'

Zita ran to the window, and returned hastily with a blank face.

'They have found my van! They have got inside. They are clambering on the roof. They are treating it worse than poultry! Oh, Mark! Mark!'

Then through the window she pleaded, 'Spare my van. Here are ten gold sovereigns.' Then to Mark, 'Take my money, go to the men, and get them to leave my darling, precious van alone.'

'Stay,' said Drownlands. 'I have changed my mind.' He went to the door and summoned the domestics, who had fled when the brickbat crashed into the room. 'Come here, Leehanna. Sarah, get out of your fits and come at once. Come here, Tom Easy.'

The frightened servants obeyed.

'Bring a candle,' he said.

The scared housekeeper did as required.

When Drownlands had received the light, he went into the passage, and, holding it before the face of Mark, said to the domestics, 'Do you know who this is? Is not this Mark Runham? Can you swear to it?' He paused for an answer to each question.

'He has come here, pushed his way into my house, against my wishes, to force me to contribute twenty pounds towards the cause of the rioters. He threatens me with the burning of my ricks if I do not comply. Is it not so?'

'I have come,' said Mark, 'because I am desirous to save you, as well as others in your house, from injury; and also to intervene and protect these misguided men against committing a crime.'

'They touched nothing at Crumbland.'

'No; we gave them food and drink.'

'Yes, you are hand and glove with them.'

And now you are acting as their spokesman and their leader. Take my money—twenty pounds, and take Zita's ten pounds—thirty pounds in all, the plunder of this house. Mind you, I give it on compulsion. I do not find meat and liquor for the rioters; I do this to save my ricks of corn. And I give it to you, Mark Runham acting for the rioters.'

Drownlands turned to those present.

'I call upon you all to witness, you, Leehanna Tunkiss, you, Sarah, you, Tom Easy, and you, Zita, that I pay over my twenty pounds against my will. Open your hand, Mark Runham. Let them see that you have there my twenty pounds and Zita's ten pounds. There are the sovereigns all in gold. They are well spent—well spent—they rid me of you.'

A few moments later a shout rang from the crowd without—'Tiger Ki has shelled out. For the Union, for the Cause! for the fen labourers. Twenty pounds! Twenty pounds for liberty

and right! The cheap loaf and the big wage! Hurrah! hurrah, boys! Forward to Ely! On to the banks. On to the mills!’

Drownlands looked after the retreating mob from his window, and said, with a sneer, ‘Go on—to the gallows, Mark Runham; I am clear of you now. Cheap at twenty pounds.’

CHAPTER XXIII

TEN POUNDS

NOTWITHSTANDING the call of 'On to Ely!' the mob was not at once in motion. Something delayed it.

Zita went to the window and looked out. She saw that which excited and angered her, and, turning her head to Drownlands, said—

'It is a shame! It is disgraceful! They have taken my ten pounds, and yet they are carrying off my van. They have put Jewel into the shafts. They might as well have harnessed the Archbishop! He's stiffening his legs and setting back his ears. Look how he's cocking his tail. They will have to drag on van and Jewel together. What a thing the general public is!

I never knew it in this mood before, and yet I thought I knew it pretty well. I'll clear the public out of my van. There are a dozen inside, and a score on the roof. They have no right to do this after accepting my money.'

She left the window.

'Zita, where are you going?' asked Drownlands.

'Going to send the general public skipping,' she answered.

'You cannot do it. It is not safe to leave the house.'

'Trust me. I've swept the poultry off, and I'm not afraid of the public. I know how to deal with them as I do with fowls.'

Before Drownlands had time to offer further remonstrance, she had darted out of the office, run to her own room, taken a pair of fencing foils from the stores, had descended the stairs two steps at a time, had unbarred the door and was out in the yard, making for the van.

‘Stand still—don’t move,’ she said to Jewel, as she passed his head; and he turned one of his eyes at her and winked.

‘Clear away at once,’ she shouted to those around the van. ‘You have taken my money, and must let the conveyance alone.’

‘Who are you? We’ve no money of yours.’

‘Yes, you have. I sent out ten pounds to you. Go, ask your commander, secretary, treasurer, or whatever you call him. He has pocketed my ten pounds, and you are bound to leave my van alone. I am the Cheap Jack girl.’

‘Are you the daughter of the Cheap Jack who died here?’

‘Yes, I am; and this is my van. Hands off. You have no quarrel against me. What have I done to make bread dear and keep wages low? I do not belong to these parts. Stand aside.’

She thrust her way to the back of the van where was the glass door. This had been

opened, and several men had ensconced themselves inside on the benches.

Zita entered, a foil in each hand. Within it was dark, but she nevertheless knew that the interior was packed full of men.

‘This is my conveyance,’ she said imperiously; ‘you have no more right to enter it than you have to occupy the house of the Lord Mayor. I have got a sword in each hand. I cannot see any one in the dark, but I will dagg with each hand, as you dagg for eels, and I will go on dagging till I have got a man wriggling at the end of each.’

Down went the front of the van, and out tumbled a dozen lusty men, one over another, stumbling, falling, sprawling, in the trampled snow and straw.

Zita went through the van from aft to fore, and satisfied herself that it was cleared of its human occupants. Then, standing on the platform, which had been thrown forward by those

who burst away from her foils, she looked up at the roof. A score of men and youths was on it, their legs pendent.

‘Down with you at once!’ she said. ‘Do you see these rapiers? Do you think I can’t run a man through as easy as stick a needle in a pin-cushion? It’s not the running in—it’s the pulling out is the trouble. There’s a button at the end of each blade. I have got only two—so I can pin but two of you, and that shall be the last two that leave the roof.’

She made as though about to scramble on to the top of the van, and away went the men seated there, dropping like ripe pears from a tree.

Zita leisurely reclosed the front of the van, and went out at the back and shut that door also.

‘That’s a good job done, Jewel,’ said she. ‘Now run the van backwards into the shed, and you shall return to the stable. Roman candles,

Jewel — pop-bang ! Roman candles at your nose.'

'Hold there, you Cheap Jack girl !' shouted a broad-shouldered man, coming up and laying his hand on the bit. 'We have taken this conveyance for the Union. It is confiscated.'

'Whether taken and confiscated I cannot say,' said Zita. 'But I know I have paid ten pounds to have it untaken and set at liberty. Return my ten sovereigns if you take from me my van.'

'We have no ten sovereigns of yours.'

'Yes, you have. And a shame it is that you should rob a poor Cheap Jack girl. Not that she belongs to the general public, save and deliver us !—but she is a working girl, and poor.'

'We have had no money of yours, and we requisition the van. We want to load it in Ely. It will serve our purpose better than a waggon.'

'You shall not have it,' replied Zita. 'Fair trade is fair trade, and he that will not deal honourably I will run through, and leave the

button sticking between his shoulders, and that will spoil a good weskit.'

The man sprang back as she threatened him with one of the foils.

'I will tell you what it is,' said Zita; 'you will not believe me till I have made an example of one of you.'

'Where is your ten pounds?' asked Pip Beamish, who had descended from the waggon.

'Ay,' said several of those who stood round; 'that is what we should uncommon like to know.'

'Where are my ten pounds?' repeated Zita. 'That is a fine question for you to put to me, when I'll be bound you have them in your pocket.'

'Bring them out, Pip!' called one of the men.

'I have not got her money. I have not touched it,' protested the commander.

'I gave it to Mark Runham along with the master's twenty pounds.'

‘The twenty pounds has been put into the Union box—I never touched your ten.’

‘Come, come, Pip,’ said a cluster of men, ‘no shuffling. Mark wouldn’t have held back the money. You have had it, sure enough.’

‘I have not had one farthing of it.’

‘I paid ten pounds to have my van set at liberty. I did not wish to have it sat upon, and the sides kicked, and the varnish scratched. I gave ten pounds to save it from that.’

‘What did you get, Beamish?’ asked Aaron Chevell.

‘I got just twenty pounds and no more,—the twenty pounds that Drownlands contributed,—and that I put into the box with the rest.’

‘And not my ten?’ exclaimed Zita. ‘That is a falsehood. My ten was with his twenty. Thirty pounds in all, in gold.’

‘There has been cheating,’ shouted two or three.

‘That is what comes of jaw and preaching.’

‘Mates,’ said Aaron Chevell, ‘we must not let this pass. Let us have judge and jury. There has been robbery of the common fund. Mates, I vote that we arrest Pip Beamish, and try him at once.’

‘Have him up in the cart,’ said Tansley. ‘Comrades all! light some more straw wisps. There has been a case of roguery. There has been our chief officer taking the money that was contributed to the Union, and pocketing it for his private use. I charge Ephraim Beamish, and vote that he be deposed from his command, and be tried for felony.’

‘I second it,’ shouted Isaac Harley. ‘And what I say is—like enough. He who wants most has taken it. A chap as hasn’t a house to call his home, nor an honest employ in which to earn his living.’

‘It is not what I calls respectable,’ said one man, ‘that we should march under such a rascal.’

Then ensued a chorus of voices.

‘Up into the waggon with him, and try him there.’

In vain did Beamish protest that he had not defrauded the Union, that he had received no more than twenty pounds. The rest suspected him, and were jealous of his assumption of authority.

‘You Cheap Jack girl,’ called Chevell, ‘we want your evidence. Ay, bring the swords along with you, if you’re afraid of us, but we do not hurt women.’

Zita allowed herself to be conducted to the waggon, and assisted into it with rough courtesy.

A fen-farm waggon is a very massive structure, more massive, perhaps, than one in other parts of England. It has its peculiarity, which consists in the front board being unusually high and arched at top. Often may women be seen going to market in the waggons, crouching against this high board, which screens them from the wind.

There is much vermilion paint employed on the waggons, and the front board usually blazes with colour. It was so on this occasion. The waggon carried off by the rioters had recently been painted, and the vermilion was of the brightest.

Isaac Harley cried from his place in the waggon, 'Mates, who is to be judge?'

'We will have no judge but ourselves,' was the ready response.

'Then,' cried Tansley, 'choose your jury.'

'We will all be jury!' shouted the mob.

Then Aaron Chevell, standing forward, said, 'Comrades, the case is this. This young gal—she is the Cheap Jack's lass, staying here—says she gave ten sovereigns in gold to the labourers' cause, to have her van let alone. And she gave it along with the twenty pounds of Tiger Ki. Now we want to know what has become of this contribution of hers. Ephraim Beamish swears he never received it.'

‘I had the twenty pounds of Mark Runham,’ said Beamish, ‘but not ten besides.’

‘You stand by the front board,’ said Chevell to Zita, ‘and tell your story. We will hold Beamish, and every one shall judge.’

‘What? the general public?’ asked Zita, looking round at the crowd of upturned faces.

‘Yes ; it shall give judgment.’

‘Then you’ll have rare judgment,’ said Zita. She went forward to the place pointed out to her, and stood there, with her back to the scarlet board, and leaned on her foils. Blazing straw wisps were held up, brilliantly illumining the whole scene.

‘I call to silence,’ said Chevell, ‘and let us hear what the Cheap Jack gal has to say.’

‘What I have to say is this,’ said Zita. ‘I saw that you had drawn out my van, the house in which I was born and reared, the shop whence all our profits came, and were treating it worse than did the poultry. So I gave my

savings to Mark Runham, ten pounds, all I had on me in gold, at the same time that the master gave twenty pounds to save his corn-stacks. Mark Runham took it to the man, Pip Beamish, who is your captain.'

'No, he ain't! we have deposed him!' was shouted on all sides.

Then voices were raised for Runham, but Mark was not to be found.

'We want another witness,' said Chevell.

'There is one,' said Zita, pointing with a foil to Drownlands at the window of his office. 'There are more if you desire them—Leehanna Tunkiss, the girl Sarah, and Tom Easy. They all saw me give Mark the money.'

Aaron called to Drownlands if it was so. Drownlands answered in assent.

'Summon the other witnesses,' commanded the self-constituted judge.

Whilst the men knocked at the house door and demanded the presence of Mrs. Tunkiss

and the girl Sarah, Beamish raised his voice in protest.

‘I say, mates and comrades all, this is strange and unwarranted proceedings. Am not I your leader?’

A shout of, ‘You was—but you’re a thief—we’ll have none of you. I vote for Aaron Chevell. Duck him; he’s a turncoat. He’s a cheat and robs the poor men.’

‘It is false!’ shouted Beamish, between rage and disappointment. ‘How can I have acted as you say, when I am the man who urged you on,—I, who have the cause at heart more than any of you?’

‘Oh yes! that’s how Judas talked!’ shouted some one in the crowd. Then there came yells of, ‘Judas! Judas! Let him hang like Judas!’

The door of the house was not opened to allow the witnesses to issue at the dictate of the mob.

‘We must have more witnesses,’ said Chevell. ‘We don’t lay much store on Drownlands. He ain’t taken the oath.’

Then Zita appealed to the master of Prickwillow to suffer the maids to come forth. After some hesitation he agreed.

‘I’ll let ’em out if you’ll hang Beamish,’ shouted he from the window.

Presently the door of the house was cautiously opened, and Drownlands, who stood at it, thrust forth the two women. Mrs. Tunkiss was white and quaking; Sarah nigh upon a fit.

‘Now, then,’ demanded the judge, ‘up into the waggon wi’ you. And, lads, hold up the torches that I may see if they looks honest and truthful. You — Leehanna Tunkiss — did this Cheap Jack girl give ten pounds for us into the hands of Beamish?’

‘Oh yes! forty!’ exclaimed the woman, who did not understand what was being done, and

thought she might be incriminating Zita, or doing her some harm by the admission.

‘She don’t quite agree about the figure,—she says forty,—but she establishes the fact,’ said Chevell, addressing the crowd. ‘You swear to it?’

‘Oh, I swear!’ exclaimed Mrs. Tunkiss. ‘Oh, gentlemen, let me down! I shall faint.’

‘Pass her down,’ ordered Aaron. ‘Now you other — Sarah Gathercole — did she give him money? She shakes her head—I mean she nods.’

‘She has the Vitus’ dance,’ protested the accused.

‘She understands what’s she’s axed—eh?’

The poor girl nodded in her nervous fit.

‘And you swear to it—the Cheap Jack girl gave ten pounds?’

Again she went into fits of jerking and nodding.

‘She’s mighty sure of it, that she be,’ said

Aaron. 'What say you, mates and chums? Is it proved?'

A roar in response, in the affirmative.

'Now then,' said Chevell, 'it is for Pip Beamish to answer in his defence.'

'I never had more than twenty pounds. Search me if you will.'

'You may have been too sharp for that,' said Isaac Harley. 'Mates, he ain't got a defence. I vote for condemnation. This Pip Beamish has been terribly stuck up, and has given himself the airs of a dook, and has been ordering us about. I vote that he is a thieving rascal. What say you?'

'Hear! hear! We say the same!' Then ensued shouts of, 'Kick him down! Duck him! Chuck him into the Lark!'

In a moment Beamish was plucked out of the waggon, flapping his long arms in protest and entreaty, was jostled, beaten, kicked, and finally thrown into the dyke—the one honest

and sincere man among the leaders of the rabble.

‘Now then, mates,’ called Chevell, ‘it is right and proper that we should elect another commander.’

‘We want no commanders!’ shouted the mob. ‘We know what we want! We will all be commanders! Are we not the general public?’

‘Then I vote,’ cried Harley, ‘that we lose no more time, but move on to Ely.’

Zita was helped out of the cart. The improvised torches were set in motion, forming a line of fire as the whole mob of rioters left the farm, and marched along the dark embankment, whilst the waggon bounced below on the drove.

As Zita stood by the van, which she had thrust back with the aid of Jewel into the shed, a hand was laid on hers.

‘Zita!’

The voice was that of Mark.

‘Oh, Mark!’

‘Zita, here are your ten pounds. I did not give them to Beamish.’

‘Mark! and he has been deposed, and cuffed and beaten, for having stolen it.’

‘He has been thrown into the dyke, and I have helped him out of the water. Do not be disconcerted. I could not have done him a better turn than this, to get him out of association with men who are running their heads into hangmen’s nooses.’

CHAPTER XXIV

A NEW DANGER

MARK, how was it that you did not give them my ten pounds?’

‘Why, my dear Zita, I thought I could get them off without it. I gave them Drownlands’ twenty. He escaped cheap at that price, and twenty pounds is nothing to him. I made sure I could induce them to leave your van alone without payment to do so, and when I saw them harness Jewel to it, then I was quite certain they would have to leave it; you do not suppose I would have suffered those rascals to take your money except in an extremity? To rob you was to rob me, Zit—for I never would have suffered you to lose those ten pounds. If

I had been constrained to give them up, I would have refunded this sum to you out of my own pocket.'

'You are very good.'

'Not at all. I have more money than I know how to spend.'

'You are good all round. You pulled Pip Beamish out of the water, and I know you do not love him.'

'You see I help one I love, and one I do not love.'

Zita coloured. 'I did not mean that.'

'Then I do,' said Mark roguishly. 'You are in the right in this, that I do not love Beamish,—for one thing, because I think him a perverse, meddlesome, mischievous, discontented donkey, and for another, because of Kainie.'

'Kainie again?' exclaimed Zita, drawing back.

'Yes, because I do not choose to have him running after her.'

‘Why should he not run after her as well as you?’

‘Because he can never make her happy.’

‘And you can?’

‘I can try,’ said Mark.

‘Well, that is frank!’ said Zita, huffed. ‘You called me “Dear Zita,” just now—I suppose it is “Dear Kainie” as well.’

‘My dear Zita’—

‘Perhaps you will keep your “dears” for her, or any one else who cares to have them and share them with others. I do not wish to be so termed. I refuse to be so called.’

She turned to leave. He caught her by the arm.

‘Do not be cross. I cannot explain matters now. It is all right. I did not mean to offend you.’

But Zita would not speak. She hastened to the house with pouting lips, burning cheeks, and sunken eyes. As she entered, she en-

countered Drownlands, in his slouched hat, and wearing a long great coat in place of his usual tiger-skin. He held a whip in his hand, and had a pistol sticking out of his breast pocket.

‘Are you going out?’ asked the girl.

‘Yes. You are in no further danger. The rabble will not return. I shall follow them.’

‘Why so?’

‘To bring all I can to the gallows. I shall watch every man I know, and see what his proceedings are. I shall take account of every act of lawlessness. They have not had my twenty pounds for nothing. I shall get some satisfaction in return. In Ely folks will be too much alarmed, the faces will be too strange for there to be recognition of offenders. That is my work. I shall witness against them, man by man, beginning with my own labourers who have revolted against me. I have purchased the right with my twenty pounds — a life for every pound—ha! ha!’

Then, looking steadily into Zita's eyes, he said in a low, bitter tone, 'I shall begin with Mark Runham.'

'Mark?' echoed the girl. 'He has done no harm.'

'Has he not? He entered my house uninvited. He acted for the rioters. He was their mouthpiece. He extorted money from me for them.'

He struck his boot with his whip, strode faster, then turned on the doorstep and said, 'If not the gallows for Mark, then transportation. I am well rid of him. See what it is for a man to venture himself in my way.'

Zita was startled. What had Mark done to incur the penalties of the law? Was it conceivable that Drownlands was in earnest? He made idle menaces. He had threatened to string the rioters to every bough of his five ash trees. He had not done it, and he could not do it. His present menace was as empty.

She watched the master ride forth from the stable when he had saddled his horse himself. No man was left on the premises to attend on him. The boy, Tom Easy, was too frightened to be of service, and Drownlands was impatient to be off.

As the farmer rode past the door, he turned his face towards Zita, but in the darkness she could not see its expression.

He pointed in the direction of Ely with his whip, and at that moment Zita heard a roar of voices, followed by an explosion of firearms borne upon the wind. In fact, the rioters had reached the metropolis of the Fens. They had let the waggon precede the marching body. The front board had been notched to receive the fowling-pieces, and the insurgent labourers, on reaching the main street, had announced their entry by a discharge of firearms and a ringing shout, calculated to strike terror into the hearts of the citizens.

Zita did not remain long inactive, listening to the sounds of uproar in the distance.

‘Sharp! a pail!’ she called to the quaking kitchen-maid. ‘There is no reason why you should be idle, or I either, because a parcel of men are making fools of themselves.’

‘A pail? What can you want a pail for at such a time as this?’ asked Mrs. Tunkiss. ‘You ought to be down on your knees praying.’

‘You would want a pail, and soap, and water, and a scrubbing-brush, Leehanna, if you had been drawn out into the yard, and had had a score of bumpkins sitting on your back and kicking your sides with their dirty boots. I am not going to let my van remain all night in its present condition, to have the clay caked over it in the morning, just because wheat is up and wages down, and folks don’t like to have it so. I will clean the van before I go to bed.’

Mrs. Tunkiss and Sarah were too much overcome to render assistance. Sarah was shaking and jerking in every limb, and Leehanna had got down her Bible to read about the fire and brimstone rained on the cities of the plain, and the escape of Lot, and to conceive herself to be a female Lot. Zita furnished herself with what she required, and set vigorously to work, commenting as she went on upon the bruises and scratches in the varnish and paint, which the sides of the van had received from the boots of those who invaded it that evening.

She was engaged on the roof of the van, when, all at once, her thoughts took a different direction, and, kneeling upright, scrubbing-brush in one hand and a piece of soap in the other, she exclaimed—

‘That was impudence, if you please! to tell me he did not approve of Pip going after Kainie, and that he will do his utmost to

make her happy! Does he think he can have us both? That may be fen ways, it isn't caravan morals. Hark!—what is that?’

She could hear the alarm bell of Ely Minster pealing.

‘There was a song of father's that I mind,’ said Zita, still kneeling upright, ‘and if Mark had only been brought up in a van instead of desultory-like on the Fens, he'd have learned the things he ought to do, and the things he ought to leave alone, taught him by songs and other ways.’ She sang—

‘Young men, be advised, if love gets in your sconce,
Don't ever go courting two maidens at once;
With one you may work along safely and sound,
'Twixt two stools you're certain to come to the
ground.’

A lurid glare was in the sky over Ely, and the bell continued to peal its note of distress.

The thoughts of Zita reverted to the threat

of Drownlands. He had said he would bring Mark to the gallows, or, at all events, send him into transportation.

This had seemed to her at the time an idle threat, as the empty explosion of anger, that could do no harm, whilst it relieved the master's chafed feelings. But as she turned the matter over in her head, it appeared to her no longer as trifling a concern as she had at first supposed it to be.

Mark had entered the house, and had induced the master to part with his money to save his ricks from being burnt down, and his house from being broken into. This fact was capable of two interpretations. Mark's purpose had been obvious enough to her; but it was quite possible for his action to be misrepresented as one of sympathy with the rioters, and his interposition as being due to his having been appointed by them to act in their behalf.

Zita was now able to comprehend the purport of Drownlands calling up the servants to look at Mark, and to witness the payment of the money. And at the same time she realised the force of his words when he said that he had paid the money to be rid of Mark. She could penetrate to the inner chambers of Drownlands' heart, and read there his thoughts and intentions.

If Mark were removed, it was likely that Zita would prove more pliable. She would feel her loneliness, her isolation, and be driven to accept him as her protector. Zita was very angry when these ideas rose in her mind. She thought it incumbent on her to seek Runham and warn him to be on his guard, especially to avoid having any more connection with the rioters. Drownlands had gone in the wake of the mob; so, possibly, had Mark, out of curiosity—out of a wish to intervene, as he had intervened at Prickwillow.

Zita put down the pail, and, instead of returning to the house, walked down the road that led from the farm into the main drove by the side of the Lark embankment.

CHAPTER XXV

‘I DON’T CARE THAT!’

ZITA was now seriously alarmed. She knew that Drownlands was one who was without scruple in carrying out the ends at which he aimed.

He had not let drop these ominous words at random. He hated Mark with deadly animosity, and Zita knew very well the reason. He loved her, and considered that Mark stood in his way. He hoped, she did not question, that by removing Mark there would remain no other serious obstacle in the way of his suit. Drownlands would not have recourse to violence. The remembrance of what he had done to the young man’s father precluded that; but he

would not hesitate to adopt any other means that promised to relieve him of his rival.

Zita had formed no plan as to what she would do. She walked in the direction of Ely, on the chance of catching Mark up, or of finding some one who could inform her whether he had returned home to Crumbland, or had gone on after the army of the discontented. She had not walked a quarter of a mile before she saw two figures standing on the embankment against the illumined sky.

Zita was below, in the drove, and in shadow. The roadway that had been snowy was now trampled black, and a person walking or standing on it would be invisible to those on the bank, whereas the latter were in full view to such as were on the drove, and their every movement was made distinct by the reflection in the sky of the fires kindled by the rioters in Ely.

Zita hardly, if at all, considered this. She did

not at first know who these persons were who were pencilled against the red light behind them. She had no reason for remaining concealed, but she walked on a dark surface, and was therefore invisible, and trod in springy peat, so that her step was inaudible.

Before she could distinguish by their faces who the two were upon the embankment, she had discovered their personalities by their voices. One was Mark Runham and the other was Kainie.

Stung by jealousy, and instinctively, Zita stood still. She heard Kainie say, 'I wish you would go after him, Mark.'

Then she heard Runham answer, 'I cannot, and I will not. I picked him out of the dyke, streaming with fen-water—out of the dyke into which his own comrades had flung him—and in spite of all this he follows them. Such a fellow as that is past helping. No one but Pip, after being head, would consent to draggle at the end

of the body as its tail. What is more, Kainie, I do not like your interesting yourself in him. He is not for you. He has too many maggots in his brain. There is no place will suit him. Wherever he goes he will be in opposition. Kainie, do you know the old country-dance tune of “The Clean Contrary Way”? Well, that is the only strain to which Pip will caper.’

‘Poor Pip! He is not a bad fellow at heart.’

‘Maybe ; but he is terribly perverse. Possibly he would be satisfied if he were translated to what they call the Antipodes, for there his head would be pointing where our feet run, and his toes would be aiming in the direction of our heads. Once for all, I am not going into Ely after Pip. It is of no use, and my mother is in alarm. I must return to appease her fears. Now, Kainie, a word to you about yourself.’

‘What about me?’

‘Why, this: How long do you intend to remain at Red Wings?’

‘As long as I must. I suppose my uncle Drownlands will do nothing for me.’

‘But I will. You can have any money you want from me.’

‘I do not require it. I am happy at the mill. I shall not leave it yet a while. I certainly expect nothing from Uncle Ki. He never casts me even a good-day. It is hard for me to suffer because he quarrelled with my mother. I do not suppose I shall ever be the better for my relationship to him. Folks say he is going to marry the Cheap Jack girl.’

Zita heard Mark’s laugh, and then his answer. ‘She will never take him.’

‘Why not?’

‘He is too old for her.’

‘That will not trouble her much,’ answered Kainie; ‘she calculates the value of everything,

and holds a thing to be worth just what money it will bring in. I believe she has no thoughts, no care for anything but money. She knows that Uncle Ki has got land and stock, has a good house and a balance at the bank ; she will say “There’s profits,” and take him—snap at him eagerly.’

‘I do not believe you,’ said Mark, and laughed. ‘But about yourself, not Zita. My mother still objects to my bringing you home to Crumbland and acknowledging you. I do not feel comfortable and happy to be in a good house, and to have you in that hovel at that mill.’

‘I cannot go to you so long as your mother is opposed.’

‘Perhaps not ; but, after all, Kainie, she cannot hold out against you for ever. She loves me too sincerely. She has too right a mind. She will see how it frets me ; and then—when all is said and done—I am master of Crumbland, and not she. If I be driven to assert my will, she

will submit. She is certain to like, to love you, when she comes to know you. It is but for a little while waiting. I do not wish to have recourse to strong measures if delay will make all go smooth of itself. You understand that, Kainie?’

‘I will wait. I am content at the mill. But—oh, Mark! I must tell you a joke. That Cheap Jack girl was at Red Wings the other day, and she wanted to buy you of me—actually purchase you.’

‘At what price was I estimated?’

‘At a ream of black-edged notepaper and envelopes to match.’

Mark burst into laughter.

‘That is not all,’ continued Kainie. ‘When I did not prove eager for the paper, she made another bid.’

‘And that—?’

‘Was a garden syringe to kill green-fly with soapy water.’

Zita heard both laugh merrily.

‘I have not done yet,’ continued Kainie. ‘She finally produced her most splendid offer.’

‘And that was—?’

‘It was one that almost made me surrender you, Mark. A box of all kinds of scents. And she said’—Kainie could hardly speak for laughing—‘I should smell of Jockey Club in chapel—tremenjous—that’s her word—tremenjous!’

Zita’s anger was flaming hot, waves of boiling blood swept through her veins, swept before her eyes and blinded her.

Gasping for breath, she rushed up the bank, and, reaching them, struck Kainie on the cheek with her open palm before she or Mark knew she was there.

‘It is a shame!’ exclaimed Zita, sobbing with emotion. ‘It is mean to tell of me—to make sport of me!’

Then, turning on Mark, she said, ‘And I will

tell you what is preparing for you—you who laugh and jeer at the ignorant, silly Cheap Jack girl. It is the gallows or Botany Bay. And'—she snapped her fingers in his face—'if you hang or are transported, I don't care that!'

CHAPTER XXVI

A NIGHT IN ELY

THE Isle of Ely, with the city in its midst, and the cathedral in the midst of the city, is more ecclesiastical than Rome itself. Until comparatively recent times the Bishop was a petty prince therein, exercising powers of life and death. He did not indeed sit in the courts himself, and himself sentence to the block and the gallows, any more than did the Pope himself consign offenders to the flames. The secular power was committed to a 'Temporal Steward,' who held his office for life, and discharged the functions of High Sheriff, and the Bishop washed his hands of all blood-guiltiness.

The courts of justice were, however, held in

the Bishop's name, and the gaols were institutions under his jurisdiction. The Bishop appointed the municipal authorities and the justices of peace. From the High Sheriff to the town-crier, all derived their authority by commission from the Bishop.

As every acre of land in the isle and far away into the fen belonged to either Bishop or Dean and Chapter, there were no county magnates near, and no country gentry at all. Nay, even in the city itself there was no gentry of independent position. In Rome there are princes who have their territories. In Ely there were not even squires.

Accordingly, the ecclesiastical dignitaries lived very high up in roseate clouds and in an ethereal atmosphere, far above the clay land where grubbed and wriggled the professional men and the shopkeepers.

Perhaps the fact of being so completely under ecclesiastical government paralysed all initiative

in Ely, and rendered the inhabitants helpless in cases of emergency. The citizens were but overgrown babies. The lawyer, the surgeon, the M.D., the surveyor, the architect, were accustomed to be swaddled and given suck by the Right Reverend Father the Bishop, or the Very Reverend the Dean, or the Venerable the Archdeacon ; and all the officials, the temporal steward, and the justices, and the chief constable, were wont to go in leading-strings.

And they were such good babies. They always thought as the reverend fathers thought ; they never cried and kicked ; and the air of the Fens must have been salubrious, for they had all ravenous appetites for the fat of the land, which fell from the ecclesiastical tables. At the time of our tale, co-operative stores had not been so much as thought of. The Bishop, the Dean, and the canons got their groceries, their drugs, their wines, and their stationery from the Ely tradesmen. In return for their custom, these trades-

men professed the strictest churchmanship and the staunchest Toryism.

The system of appointment to offices in Ely was distinctively ecclesiastical. The magistrates were bespectacled and bewigged officials connected by marriage with some of the members of the Chapter. The constables were nominated for their general piety, or because they were burdened with large families. The watchmen were pensioned cripples or asthmatic incapables, whose utmost achievement was to crawl about at night and proclaim the hour. Everything in the city was managed for the residents by a benevolent and beneficent ecclesiastical authority, which exhibited its benevolence and beneficence by conferring offices, not on such as showed efficiency, but on such men as were incompetent to earn a livelihood in any profession or business that demanded the exercise of brain or of muscle.

When the turbulent crew from Littleport

arrived in Ely, and the rumour circulated that other Fen centres were sending their contingents of the disaffected to the capital of the Fens, neither magistrates nor constables were prepared to take prompt action to protect the town and stop the spread of disturbance. Orders were indeed issued to have the minster bell rung, to summon all sober, law-abiding citizens to unite for the common defence, but, although the bell pealed its summons, no one obeyed it, for no one knew where the rallying-point was, or what was to be done by those summoned.

The temporal steward was in bed with a mustard poultice on his chest and a dose of sweet nitre in his stomach. Consequently, when a messenger from the Deanery came to request that he would do something, the wife of the temporal steward was able to point out that he was perspiring freely and the poultice drawing vigorously. To leave his bed and the house was, therefore, out of the question.

There was no deputy sheriff to fill the place which the sheriff was incapacitated from filling. The vacancy had not been filled up, because the Bishop was hesitating, balancing the claims of one who was stone-blind against one who was stone-deaf. The prelate himself was absent on a confirmation tour, and he had taken his chaplains with him, and, what was more to the point, his butler—a man who did most of the thinking in sublunary matters for his master. The constables then in Ely were few. The chief constable, Mr. Edwards, was the manager of Mortlock's bank, and in the interests of the bank he had come to the resolution to keep in the background so as in no way to excite the angry passions of the mob. Another constable had swallowed a fish-bone, and this was being extracted by a fellow constable. A fourth was at the moment incapacitated for work by one of his constitutional and chronic fits of the hiccups. It was precisely because he suffered from this

affliction that the benevolent and beneficent ecclesiastical authority had nominated him to, and invested him with, the office of constable.

As the combined municipal and collegiate forces of watchmen were unprepared or unable to cope with the approaching masses of men, the Dean sent off his coachman on a carriage horse to Bury St. Edmund's, to invoke the aid of the military stationed there. The mob from Littleport entered the town, as already said, preceded by the waggon, in which were placed heavy wash guns loaded with slugs. To announce its arrival a volley was fired, and the slugs rattled on the tiles and broke a few windows.

No sooner had the Littleport body entered Ely, than it learned to its disappointment that nothing had been heard of the Isleham and Swaffham contingents.

In fact, discouragement had dissolved these at the onset. The small landowner, Cutman,

who had undertaken to lead the detachment from Isleham, had reconsidered the matter, and resolved that heading a riot could do him no possible good, and might do him very considerable harm. The men assembled at the Duck at the appointed hour, waited, and, as he did not appear, became uneasy, supposing that he had been alarmed ; they also reconsidered the matter, and, coming to much the same conclusion as Cutman, dispersed quietly to their several homes.

The Swaffham men were also defaulters. The tidings of what was meditated had been communicated to a large farmer there, and when the rabble approached, he met them dauntlessly, along with his stalwart sons and some trusty serving-men, all armed with blunderbusses. He addressed the mob, and, by his bold front and resolute bearing, not only prevented them from attacking his house, but persuaded them to break up and abandon their undertaking.

The Littleport body, swelled by stragglers,

and also by men who had lived in the suburbs of Ely, formed a considerable host, and had they been under efficient discipline, and had they known exactly what demands to make, and how to enforce their demands, might have produced serious results.

As it was, they did a certain amount of mischief, and took a certain amount of loot, but all in an aimless manner; and in looting or wrecking forgot the ostensible reasons for their assembly and purpose of marching upon Ely.

No sooner were they in the town than the mob resolved itself, without order given, into two detachments, whereof one attacked the flour-mills, and the other broke into the victuallers' shops to seize on their stores of ham, bacon, and sausages.

There was a large soak-mill in the lower part of the town, managed by a man named Rickwood. This was the first assailed.

By this time the magistrates, at the advice

and exhortation of their wives, had plucked up sufficient courage to venture to parley with the rioters. There were but three or four of these in the place; one was a retired steward who was almost stone-deaf, the other two were clergymen. These magistrates inquired of the fen-men what were their demands, and were answered with confused cries for higher wages, cheaper bread, and for money to be scattered among them.

Terrified by the shouts and the menacing attitude of the mob, they entered into negotiations with them, and offered to raise a certain sum of money from the inhabitants to satisfy their illegal demands. But the rioters could not agree as to the price at which they would desist from violence, nor could they wait with patience till the magistrates had collected the sum offered.

Accordingly, the conference was broken up, and the mob proceeded to smash Rickwood's windows and to beat open his doors.

The miller was not, as it chanced, at home himself, and his wife entered into parley with the rabble from a window. They demanded fifty pounds, and threatened, unless it were paid, to proceed to set fire to the mill, and the miller's habitation adjoining.

Mrs. Rickwood, in terror, promised the sum, but said that she had not so much coin in the house. She would send her son for the money to the bank.

'No! no! Come yourself!' shouted the men, and proceeded to demolish the windows.

Accordingly, Mrs. Rickwood descended, and in deadly fear issued forth into the street, after having committed the mill to the care of her son.

The banker was also, as already said, chief constable, and in the interest of Messrs. Mortlock was remaining at home, and sitting in his back parlour.

When the mob reached his house, which was

one with the bank, loud cries were raised for him, and Mrs. Rickwood knocked at the front door. After long waiting, he appeared in the doorway, as white as chalk. Mrs. Rickwood then entreated him to furnish her with fifty sovereigns in gold, in order that she might purchase immunity for her mill from the insurgent peasantry.

‘Nothing in the world will induce me to do this!’ exclaimed the chief constable heroically. Whereupon a stone was thrown at him, and struck his head, so that a little blood flowed.

‘That is to say,’ said Edwards, ‘nothing save compulsion ;’ and he hastened within to find the money.

The second body of rioters in the meantime was engaged in sacking the grocery-shops and provision-stores. One of the magistrates, the Rev. Mr. Metcalf, endeavoured to calm the mob by an assurance that he would induce the owners of the shops to purchase their immunity.

But he was successful in two instances only. In some the rabble took the money, and, notwithstanding, plundered the shops. Then a second mill was attacked, but, on ten pounds being produced, no further violence was done to it.

The night was dark. The rioters went round requisitioning faggots and coals, and soon an immense bonfire was kindled before the cathedral west front, and a second in face of St. Mary's church. The first lighted up the splendid pile, bringing out every detail of sculpture, and twinkling in the glass that filled the Norman windows.

Round this fire the young men and girls danced. Some of the men had carried provisions to the Galilee, and prepared for a carouse. The taverns had been attacked very early, and the publicans had been constrained to allow the rioters free use of their liquor.

As Mark had assured Kerenhappuch, Ephraim

Beamish had pushed his way after the rabble, undeterred by the treatment he had received at its hands, his enthusiasm unquenched by his plunge in the icy water. As there was no organisation in the mob, he was suffered to rejoin it with an occasional protest only, but Chevell, Harley, and Tansley would not allow him to remount the waggon.

No sooner did Beamish find that a great body of the insurgents were setting themselves to eat, drink; and revel about the great fire in front of the cathedral, than he got a chair, and endeavoured to harangue them, to point out to them that they were throwing away their occasion, neglecting to enforce their grievances on the employers of labour, and that they were making enemies among all the well-disposed by their capricious and lawless proceedings. But directly his face was discerned by the flicker of the fire, and his voice recognised, beaten back by the cathedral walls, than shouts were raised of, 'That's the

fellow who stole the Cheap Jack girl's money. We want no preaching here.'

His chair was tripped up, and he was sent sprawling in the dirt.

He rose angry and disconcerted. The movement of which he was the instigator, and of which he had been appointed director by vote of the men, had rejected his direction, and was taking its own suicidal course.

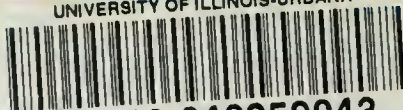
The fens immediately surrounding the isle on which Ely stood were farmed by men whose homesteads were on the gault excrescence that formed the isle. According to the preconcerted scheme, the Union of Fen Labourers was to proceed to these farmsteads one by one, to exact of the farmers a contribution to the cause, and an oath to raise the wage.

It was true enough that two or three farms had been visited which lay to right and left of the road from Littleport to Ely, but no sooner had the men reached the Fen capital, than they

forgot their purpose, directed their attention to the provision-shops, waylaid and blackmailed passengers, broke into the taverns, and thought only of eating, drinking, and making money. They entirely neglected the scheme that had been agreed to. Not a single farm in the isle was molested, not a single farmer coerced.

END OF VOL. II

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